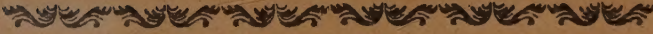


Watson's Apology

F O R

CHRISTIANITY.



LAYMAN'S GALLERY
LAYMAN, OF
A N
A P O L O G Y
FOR *Gulliver's*
CHRISTIANITY;
I N

A SERIES OF LETTERS,

Addressed to EDWARD GIBBON, Esq;
Author of the HISTORY OF THE DECLINE
AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

Being a necessary and instructive APPENDIX
thereto,

BY R. W A T S O N, D. D. F. R. S.
LORD BISHOP OF LANDAFF,
And Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of CAMBRIDGE.

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M,DCC,XCIV.

1794

the divine original of the gospel, and the miraculous energetic influence of the Deity, displayed in its primitive establishment. The poison is gilded, and offers itself as a luscious draught to the vicious and unwary. His admirers need a monitor, at hand, to deter them from it; or an antidote, to repel its noxious qualities, and restore to sanity and to truth those who have incautiously imbibed it.

THE polished style, the harmonious periods, the well-arranged and entertaining facts of the historian, have introduced his volumes into our universities, and many circulating and private libraries of this country.

To the patronage of the friends of historical truth, and of revealed religion, whether presiding and instructing at our colleges and academies, whether officiating as teachers of Christianity, or lending their aid, in the private walks of life, to its propagation, the Letters of the learned, philosophic and catholic WATSON, are presented. The celebrity of a name, which has been ranked in the first class of European literati, will commend the subsequent pages to the perusal of those, who, unacquainted with their particular merit, seek the society and correspondence of men crowned with the public laurel. The work before us has been received with very uncommon applause in the native country of its author. It was rewarded, by the church of which he was a member, with his promotion to a bishopric, the functions whereof he has ably and sedulously fulfilled. Perhaps so much useful erudition has never been displayed, in so few pages, in any defence of Christianity hitherto presented to the public. The address to sceptical gentlemen, at the close of the letters, claims their serious and impartial perusal.

THE present edition has been committed to the press, at the instance of some, who, though not called by Providence to the public defence of the RELIGION of JESUS, yet esteem it their inestimable treasure, and ardently pray for the dissemination of its principles and blessings among mankind.

THIS volume will be found entertaining and improving to those who are strangers to Mr. GIBBON, as containing a happy arrangement of some of the leading arguments in support of Christianity; and of rational replies, combating the sophisms and ungenerous insinuations which have been uttered against it.

THE readers and admirers of the historian, will consider it as a necessary and instructive Appendix to the DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE. It discovers deep thought, and extensive reading, and breathes a calm, a manly, a christian temper. The polished style of Dr. WATSON is compared by Mr. GIBBON himself to the smoothness of the Ionic dialect.

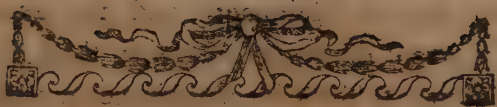
BUT the subsequent candid acknowledgment of the historian, who, in defending himself against other antagonists, declined a public controversy with our Author, will make further observations unnecessary.

“ WHEN Dr. WATSON gave to the public his APOLOGY
 “ FOR CHRISTIANITY, in a series of letters, he addressed
 “ them to the Author of the DECLINE AND FALL OF THE
 “ ROMAN EMPIRE, with a just confidence, that he had con-
 “ sidered this important object in a manner not unworthy

“ of

“ of his antagonist, or of himself. Dr. WATSON’S mode of
 “ thinking, bears a liberal and philosophical cast ; his
 “ thoughts are expressed with spirit; and their spirit is al-
 “ ways tempered by politeness and moderation. Such is
 “ the man whom I should be happy to call my friend; and
 “ whom I should not blush to call my antagonist. But the
 “ same motives which might tempt me to accept, or even to
 “ solicit a private and amicable conference, dissuaded me
 “ from entering into a public controversy with a writer of so
 “ respectable a character ; and I embraced the earliest op-
 “ portunity of expressing to Dr. WATSON himself, how
 “ sincerely I agreed with him in thinking, that ‘as the
 “ world is now possessed of the opinion of us both upon
 “ the subject in question, it may be, perhaps, as proper for
 “ us both to leave it in this state.’ *

* *Gibbon’s Indication of some passages against several opponents.*



Apology for CHRISTIANITY.

LETTER FIRST.

S I R,

IT would give me much uneasiness to be reputed an enemy to free enquiry in religious matters, or as capable of being animated into any degree of personal malevolence against those who differ from me in opinion. On the contrary, I look upon the right of private judgment, in every concern respecting God and ourselves, as superior to the controul of human authority; and have ever regarded free discussion, as the best means of illustrating the doctrine, and establishing the truth of Christianity. Let

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the followers of Mahomet, and the zealots of the church of Rome, support their several religious systems by damping every effort of the human intellect to pry into the foundations of their faith; but never can it become a Christian, to be afraid of being asked a *reason of the faith that is in him*; nor a Protestant, to be studious of enveloping his religion in mystery and ignorance; nor the church of England, to abandon that moderation, by which she permits every individual *et sentire quæ velit, et quæ sentiat dicere*.

It is not, Sir, without some reluctance, that, under the influence of these opinions, I have prevailed upon myself to address these letters to you; and you will attribute to the same motive, my not having given you this trouble sooner. I had moreover an expectation, that the task would have been undertaken by some person, capable of doing greater justice to the subject, and more worthy of your attention. Perceiving, however, that the two last chapters, the fifteenth in particular, of your very laborious and classical history of the Decline and Fall of the Roman empire, had made upon many an impression

not

not at all advantageous to Christianity ; and that the silence of others, of the clergy especially, began to be looked upon as an acquiescence in what you had therein advanced ; I have thought it my duty, with the utmost respect and good will towards you, to take the liberty of suggesting to your consideration, a few remarks upon some of the passages, which have been esteemed (whether you meant that they should be so esteemed, or not) as powerfully militating against that revelation, which still is to many, what it formerly was *to the Greeks, foolishness* ; but which we deem to be true, to be *the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth*.

To the enquiry by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth, you rightly answer, by the evidence of the doctrine itself, and the ruling providence of its Author. But afterwards, in assigning for this astonishing event five secondary causes, derived from the passions of the human heart and the general circumstances of mankind, you seem to some to have insinuated, that

Christianity, like other impostures, might have made its way in the world, though its origin had been as human as the means by which you suppose it was spread. It is no wish or intention of mine, to fasten the odium of this insinuation upon you; I shall simply endeavour to shew, that the causes you produce, are either inadequate to the attainment of the end proposed; or that their efficiency, great as you imagine it, was derived from other principles than those you have thought proper to mention.

Your first cause is "the inflexible, and, if you may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit, which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses."—Yes, Sir, we are agreed, that the zeal of the Christians was inflexible; *neither death, nor life, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, could bend it into a separation from the love of God, which was in Christ Jesus their Lord; it was an inflexible obstinacy, in not blaspheming the name of Christ, which every* where

where exposed them to persecution; and which even your amiable and philosophic Pliny thought proper, for want of other crimes, to punish with death in the Christians of his province.—We are agreed too, that the zeal of the Christians was intolerant; for it denounced *tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that did evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile*; it would not tolerate in Christian worship, those who supplicated the image of Cæsar, who bowed down at the altars of Paganism, who mixed with the votaries of Venus, or wallowed in the filth of Bacchanalian festivals.

BUT though we are thus far agreed, with respect to the inflexibility and intolerance of Christian zeal; yet as to the principle from which it was derived, we are *toto cælo* divided in opinion. You deduce it from the Jewish religion; I would refer it to a more adequate and a more obvious source, a full persuasion of the truth of Christianity. What! think you that it was a zeal derived from the unfociable spirit of Judaism, which inspired Peter with courage to upbraid the whole people of the Jews in the very capital of

Judea, with having *delivered up Jesus, with having denied him in the presence of Pilate, with having desired a murderer to be granted them in his stead, with having killed the Prince of life?* Was it from this principle, that the same apostle, in conjunction with John, when summoned, not before the dregs of the people (whose judgments they might have been supposed capable of misleading, and whose resentment they might have despised) but before the rulers and the elders and the scribes, the dread tribunal of the Jewish nation, and commanded by them to teach no more in the name of Jesus; boldly answered, *that they could not but speak the things which they had seen and heard?—they had seen with their eyes, they had handled with their hands the word of life;* and no human jurisdiction could deter them from being faithful witnesses of what they had seen and heard. Here then you may perceive the genuine and undoubted origin of that zeal, which you ascribe to what appears to me a very insufficient cause; and which the Jewish rulers were so far from considering as the ordinary effect of their religion, that they were exceedingly at a loss how

how to account for it;—now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled. The Apostles, heedless of consequences, and regardless of every thing but truth, openly every where professed themselves witnesses of the resurrection of Christ; and with a confidence, which could proceed from nothing but conviction, and which pricked the Jews to the heart, bade the house of Israel know assuredly, that God had made that same Jesus, whom they had crucified, both Lord and Christ.

I MEAN not to produce these instances of apostolic zeal, as direct proofs of the truth of Christianity; for every religion, nay, every absurd sect of every religion, has had its zealots, who have not scrupled to maintain their principles at the expence of their lives; and we ought no more to infer the truth of Christianity from the mere zeal of its propagators, than the truth of Mahometanism from that of a Turk. When a man suffers himself to be covered with infamy, pillaged of his property, and dragged at last to the block or the stake, rather than give up his opinion; the proper inference is, not

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that

that his opinion is true, but that he believes it to be true; and a question of serious discussion immediately presents itself,—upon what foundation has he built his belief? This is often an intricate enquiry, including in it a vast compass of human learning; a Bramin or a Mandarin, who should observe a missionary attesting the truth of Christianity with his blood, would, notwithstanding, have a right to ask many questions, before it could be expected, that he should give an assent to our faith. In the case indeed of the Apostles, the enquiry would be much less perplexed; since it would briefly resolve itself into this, whether they were credible reporters of facts, which they themselves professed to have seen:—And it would be an easy matter to shew, that their zeal in attesting what they were certainly competent to judge of, could not proceed from any alluring prospect of worldly interest or ambition, or from any other probable motive than a love of truth.

BUT the credibility of the Apostles' testimony, or their competency to judge of the facts which they relate, is not now to be examined; the question before us simply relates

lates to the principle, by which their zeal was excited ; and it is a matter of real astonishment to me, that any one conversant with the history of the first propagation of Christianity, acquainted with the opposition it every where met with from the people of the Jews, and aware of the repugnancy which must ever subsist between its tenets and those of Judaism, should ever think of deriving the zeal of the primitive Christians from the Jewish religion.

Born Jew and Christian, indeed, believed in one God, and abominated idolatry ; but this detestation of idolatry, had it been unaccompanied with the belief of the resurrection of Christ, would probably have been just as inefficacious in exciting the zeal of the Christian to undertake the conversion of the Gentile world, as it had for ages been in exciting that of the Jew. But supposing, what I think you have not proved, and what I am certain cannot be admitted without proof, that a zeal derived from the Jewish religion inspired the first Christians with fortitude to oppose themselves to the institutions of Paganism ; what was it, that encouraged

raged them to attempt the conversion of their own countrymen? Amongst the Jews they met with no superstitious observances of idolatrous rites; and therefore amongst them could have no opportunity of "declaring and confirming their zealous opposition to Polytheism, or of fortifying by frequent protestations their attachment to the Christian faith." Here then at least, the cause you have assigned for Christian zeal ceases to operate; and we must look out for some other principle than a zeal against idolatry, or we shall never be able satisfactorily to explain the ardour, with which the Apostles pressed the disciples of Moses, to become the disciples of Christ.

AGAIN, does a determined opposition to, and an open abhorrence of, every the minutest part of an established religion, appear to you to be the most likely method of conciliating to another faith those who profess it? The Christians, you contend, could neither mix with the Heathens in their convivial entertainments, nor partake with them in the celebration of their solemn festivals; they could neither associate with them in their hymenæal, nor funeral rites; they could not cultivate

cultivate their arts, or be spectators of their shews; in short, in order to escape the rites of Polytheism, they were, in your opinion, obliged to renounce the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of life. Now how such an extravagant and intemperate zeal as you here describe, can, humanly speaking, be considered as one of the chief causes of the quick propagation of Christianity, in opposition to all the established powers of Paganism, is a circumstance I can by no means comprehend. The Jesuit missionaries, whose human prudence no one will question, were quite of a contrary way of thinking; and brought a deserved censure upon themselves, for not scrupling to propagate the faith of Christ, by indulging to their Pagan converts a frequent use of idolatrous ceremonies. Upon the whole, it appears to me, that the Christians were in no wise indebted to the Jewish religion, for the zeal with which they propagated the gospel amongst Jews as well as Gentiles; and that such a zeal as you describe, let its principle be what you please, could never have been devised by any human understanding, as a probable

bable means of promoting the progress of a reformation in religion, much less could it have been thought of, or adopted, by a few ignorant and unconnected men.

IN expatiating upon this subject you have taken an opportunity of remarking, that "the contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles—and that, in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that singular people (the Jews) seem to have yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors, than to the evidence of their own senses." This observation bears hard upon the veracity of the Jewish scriptures; and, was it true, would force us either to reject them, or to admit a position as extraordinary as a miracle itself;—that the testimony of others produced in the human mind, a stronger degree of conviction concerning a matter of fact, than the testimony of the senses themselves.—It happens however, in the present case, that we are under no necessity of either rejecting the Jewish scriptures, or of admitting such an absurd position; for the fact is not true, that

that the contemporaries of Moses and Joshua beheld with careless indifference, the miracles related in the Bible to have been performed in their favour. That these miracles were not sufficient to awe the Israelites into an uniform obedience to the Theocracy, cannot be denied; but, whatever reasons may be thought best adapted to account for the propensity of the Jews to idolatry, and their frequent defection from the worship of the one true God, a "stubborn incredulity" cannot be admitted as one of them.

To men, indeed, whose understandings have been enlightened by the Christian revelation, and enlarged by all the aids of human learning; who are under no temptations to idolatry from without, and whose reason from within, would revolt at the idea of worshipping the infinite Author of the universe under any created symbol;—to men who are compelled, by the utmost exertion of their reason, to admit as an irrefragable truth, what puzzles the first principles of all reasoning—the eternal existence of an uncaused Being;—and who are conscious, that they cannot
give

give a full account of any one phenomenon in nature, from the rotation of the great orbs of the universe to the germination of a blade of grass, without having recourse to him, as the primary incomprehensible cause of it;—and who from seeing him every where, have, by a strange fatality (converting an excess of evidence into a principle of disbelief) at times doubted concerning his existence any where, and made the very universe their God;—to men of such a stamp, it appears almost an incredible thing, that any human being which had seen the order of nature interrupted, or the uniformity of its course suspended, though but for a moment, should ever afterwards lose the impression of reverential awe, which, they apprehend, would have been excited in their minds. But whatever effect the visible interposition of the Deity might have in removing the scepticism, or confirming the faith of a few philosophers, it is with me a very great doubt, whether the people in general of our days, would be more strongly affected by it, than they appear to have been in the days of Moses.

WAS any people under heaven to escape the certain destruction impending over them,
from

from the close pursuit of an enraged and irresistible enemy, by seeing the waters of the ocean becoming a wall to them on their right hand and on their left; they would, I apprehend, be agitated by the very same passions we are told the Israelites were, when they saw the sea returning to his strength, and swallowing up the host of Pharaoh; they would fear the Lord, they would believe the Lord, and they would express their faith and their fear by praising the Lord:—They would not behold such a great work with *careless indifference*, but with astonishment and terror; nor would you be able to detect the slightest vestige of *stubborn incredulity* in their song of gratitude.—No length of time would be able to blot from their minds the memory of such a transaction, or induce a doubt concerning its Author, though future hunger and thirst might make them call out for water and bread, with a desponding and rebellious importunity.

BUT it was not at the Red Sea only, that the Israelites regarded with something more than a *careless indifference* the amazing miracles which God had wrought; for when the law was declared to them from Mount Sinai, *all the people*
saw

*saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the tempest, and the mountains smoking; and when the people saw it, they removed and stood afar off; and they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: But let not God speak with us, lest we die.—*This again, Sir, is the Scripture account of the language of the contemporaries of Moses and Joshua; and I leave it to you to consider, whether this is the language of *stubborn incredulity, and careless indifference.*

We are told in Scripture too, that whilst any of the contemporaries of Moses and Joshua were alive, the whole people served the Lord; the impression which a sight of the miracles had made, was never effaced; nor the obedience which might have been expected as a natural consequence, refused, till Moses and Joshua, and all their contemporaries, were gathered unto their fathers; till another generation after them arose, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.—But the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the Lord that he did for Israel.

I AM far from thinking you, Sir, unacquainted with Scripture, or desirous of sinking the weight of its testimony ; but as the words of the history, from which you must have derived your observation, will not support you, in imputing *careless indifference* to the contemporaries of Moses, or *stubborn incredulity* to the forefathers of the Jews ; I know not what can have induced you to pass so severe a censure upon them, except that you look upon a lapse into idolatry as a proof of infidelity. In answer to this, I would remark, that with equal soundness of argument we ought to infer, that every one who transgresses a religion, disbelieves it ; and that every individual, who in any community incurs civil pains and penalties, is a disbeliever of the existence of the authority by which they are inflicted. The sanctions of the Mo-
saic law were, in your opinion, terminated within the narrow limits of this life ; in that particular then, they must have resembled the sanctions of all other civil laws ; *transgress and die* is the language of every one of them, as well as that of Moses ; and I know not what reason we have to expect, that the Jews, who were animated by the same hopes of tempo-

ral rewards, impelled by the same fears of temporal punishments with the rest of mankind, shou'd have been so singular in their conduct, as never to have listened to the clamours of passion before the still voice of reason ; as never to have preferred a present gratification of sense, in the lewd celebration of idolatrous rites, before the rigid observance of irksome ceremonies.

BEFORE I release you from the trouble of this letter, I cannot help observing, that I could have wished you had furnished your reader with Limborch's answers to the objections of the Jew Orobio, concerning the perpetual obligation of the law of Moses ; you have indeed mentioned Limborch with respect, in a short note ; but though you have studiously put into the mouths of the Judaising Christians in the Apostolic days, and with great strength inserted into your text, whatever has been said by Orobio or others against Christianity, from the supposed perpetuity of the Mosaic dispensation ; yet you have not favoured us with any one of the numerous replies, which have been made to these seemingly strong objections. You are pleased, it is true, to say, " that the industry of
our

Our learned divines has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the old Testament, and the ambiguous conduct of the Apostolic teachers." It requires, Sir, no learned industry, to explain what is so obvious and so express, that he who runs may read it: The language of the old Testament is this; *Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.* This, methinks, is a clear and solemn declaration, there is no ambiguity at all in it, that the covenant with Moses was not to be perpetual, but was in some future time to give way to a new covenant. I will not detain you with an explanation of what Moses himself has said upon this subject; but you may try, if you please, whether you can apply the following declaration, which Moses made to the Jews, to any prophet or succession of prophets, with the same propriety that you can to Jesus Christ;—*The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet, from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him shall ye hearken.* If you think this

ambiguous or obscure, I answer, That it is not a history, but a prophecy ; and as such unavoidably liable to some degree of obscurity, till interpreted by the event.

NOR was the conduct of the Apostles more ambiguous, than the language of the old Testament ; they did not indeed at first comprehend the whole of the nature of the new dispensation ; and when they did understand it better, they did not think proper upon every occasion to use their Christian liberty ; but with true Christian charity, accommodated themselves in matters of indifference to the prejudices of their weaker brethren. But he who changes his conduct with a change of sentiments, proceeding from an increase of knowledge, is not ambiguous in his conduct ; nor should he be accused of a culpable duplicity, who in a matter of the last importance endeavours to conciliate the good-will of all, by conforming in a few innocent observances to the particular persuasions of different men.

ONE remark more, and I have done. In your account of the Gnostics, you have given us a very minute catalogue of the objections, which they made to the authority of Moses,
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from his account of the creation, of the patriarchs, of the law, and of the attributes of the Deity : I have not leisure to examine, whether the Gnostics of former ages really made all the objections you have mentioned. I take it for granted, upon your authority, that they did : But I am certain if they did, that the Gnostics of modern times have no reason to be puffed up with their knowledge, or to be had in admiration as men of subtle penetration or refined erudition ; they are all miserable copiers of their brethren of antiquity ; and neither Morgan, nor Tindal, nor Bolingbroke, nor Voltaire, have been able to produce scarce a single new objection. You think that the Fathers have not properly answered the Gnostics. I make no question, Sir, you are able to answer them to your own satisfaction ; and informed of every thing that has been said by our *industrious divines* upon the subject : And we should have been glad, if it had fallen in with your plan to have administered together with the poison its antidote ; but since that is not the case, lest its malignity should spread too far, I must just mention it to my younger readers, that Leland and others, in their replies to the modern Deists,

have given very full, and, as many learned men apprehend, very satisfactory answers to every one of the objections, which you have derived from the Gnostic heresy.

I am, &c.

LETTER



LETTER SECOND.

S I R,

“THE doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth,” is the second of the causes to which you attribute the quick increase of Christianity. Now if we impartially consider the circumstances of the persons, to whom the doctrine, not simply of a future life, but of a future life accompanied with punishments as well as rewards ; not only of the immortality of the soul, but of the immortality of the soul accompanied with that of the resurrection, was delivered ; I cannot be of opinion that, abstracted from the supernatural testimony by which it was enforced, it could have met with any very extensive reception amongst them.

It was not that kind of future life, which they expected; it did not hold out to them the punishments of the infernal regions, as *aniles fabulas*: To the question, *Quid si post mortem maneat animi?* they could not answer with Cicero and the philosophers,—*Beatos esse concedo*;—because there was a great probability, that it might be quite otherwise with them. I am not to learn, that there are passages to be picked up in the writings of the antients, which might be produced as proofs of their expecting a future state of punishment for the flagitious; but this opinion was worn out of credit, before the time of our Saviour: The whole disputation in the first book of the Tusculan Questions, goes upon the other supposition: Nor was the absurdity of the doctrine of future punishments confined to the writings of the philosophers, or the circles of the learned and polite; for Cicero, to mention no others, makes no secret of it in his public pleadings before the people at large. You yourself, Sir, have referred to his oration for Cluentius; in this oration, you may remember he makes great mention of a very abandoned fellow, who had forged I know not how many wills, murdered I know not how many

many wives, and perpetrated a thousand other villanies ; yet even to this profligate, by name Oppianicus, he is persuaded, that death was not the occasion of any evil.* Hence, I think, we may conclude, that such of the Romans, as were not wholly infected with the annihilating notions of Epicurus, but entertained (whether from remote tradition, or enlightened argumentation) hopes of a future life, had no manner of expectation of such a life, as included in it the severity of punishment, denounced in the Christian scheme against the wicked.

NOR was it that kind of future life, which they wished ; they would have been glad enough of an Elysium, which could have admitted into it men who had spent this life in the perpetration of every vice, which can debase and pollute the human heart. To abandon every seducing gratification of sense, to pluck up every latent root of ambition, to subdue every impulse of revenge, to divest themselves of every inordinate habit, in which their glory and their
pleasure

* Nam nunc quidem quid tandem mali illi mors attulit ? nisi forte ineptiis ac fabulis ducimur, ut existimemus apud inferos impiorum supplicia perferre ; ac plures illic offendisse inimicos quam hic reliquisse—quæ si falsa sint, id quod omnes intelligunt, &c.

pleasure consisted ; to do all this and more, before they could look up to the doctrine of a future life, without terror and amazement, was not, one would think, an easy undertaking ; nor was it likely, that many would forsake the religious institutions of their ancestors, set at nought the gods, under whose auspices the Capitol had been founded, and Rome made mistress of the world, and suffer themselves to be persuaded into the belief of a tenet, the very mention of which made Felix tremble, by any thing less than a full conviction of the supernatural authority of those who taught it.

THE several schools of Gentile philosophy had discussed, with no small subtlety, every argument, which reason could suggest, for and against the immortality of the soul ; and those uncertain glimmerings of the light of nature, would have prepared the minds of the learned for the reception of the full illustration of this subject by the gospel, had not the resurrection been a part of the doctrine therein advanced. But that this corporal frame, which is hourly mouldering away, and resolved at last into the undistinguished mass of elements, from which it was at first derived, should ever be clothed with immortality ;

mortality ; that this corruptible should ever put on incorruption, is a truth so far removed from the apprehension of philosophical research, so dissimilar from the common conceptions of mankind, that amongst all ranks and persuasions of men it was esteemed an impossible thing. At Athens the philosophers had listened with patience to St. Paul, whilst they conceived him but a *setter forth of strange gods* ; but as soon as they comprehended, that by the *αναστασις*, he meant the resurrection, they turned from him with contempt. It was principally the insisting upon the same topic, which made Ecclus think, *that much learning had made him mad* : And the questions, *how are the dead raised up ? and, with what body do they come ?* seem, by Paul's solicitude to answer them with fulness and precision, to have been not unfrequently proposed to him, by those who were desirous of becoming Christians.

THE doctrine of a future life then, as promulgated in the gospel, being neither agreeable to the expectations, nor corresponding with the wishes, nor conformable to the reason of the Gentiles, I can discover no motive (setting aside the true one, the divine power of its first preachers) which could induce them to receive it ; and in consequence

quence of their belief, to conform their loose morals to the rigid standard of gospel purity, upon the mere authority of a few contemptible fishermen of Judea. And even you yourself, Sir, seem to have changed your opinion concerning the efficacy of the expectation of a future life in converting the Heathens, when you observe in the following chapter, that "the Pagan multitude reserving their gratitude for temporal benefits alone, rejected the inestimable present of life and immortality, which was offered to mankind by Jesus of Nazareth."

MONTESQUIEU is of opinion, that it will ever be impossible for Christianity to establish itself in China and the East, from this circumstance, that it prohibits a plurality of wives: How then could it have been possible for it to have pervaded the voluptuous Capital, and traversed the utmost limits of the empire of Rome, by the feeble efforts of human industry or human knavery?

BUT the Gentiles, you are of opinion, were converted by their fears; and reckon the doctrines of Christ's speedy appearance, of the millenium, and of the general conflagration, amongst those additional circumstances, which gave weight to that concerning a future state. Before

fore I proceed to the examination of the efficiency of these several circumstances, in alarming the apprehensions of the Gentiles, what if I should grant your position? still the main question recurs, From what source did they derive the fears, which converted them? Not surely from the mere human labours of men, who were every where spoken against, made a spectacle of, and considered as the filth of the world, and the offscouring of all things—not surely from the human powers of him, who professed himself *rude in speech, in bodily presence contemptible, and a despiser of the excellency of speech, and the enticing words of men's wisdom.* No, such wretched instruments were but ill fitted, to inspire the haughty, and the learned Romans, with any other passions than those of pity, or contempt.

Now, Sir, if you please, we will consider that universal expectation of the approaching end of the world, which you think had such great influence in converting the Pagans to the profession of Christianity. The near approach, you say, of this wonderful event had been predicted by the Apostles, “though the revolution of seventeen centuries has instructed us, not to press too closely the mysterious language of prophecy

prophecy and revelation." That this opinion, even in the times of the Apostles, had made its way into the Christian church, I readily admit ; but that the Apostles ever either predicted this event to others, or cherished the expectation of it in themselves, does not seem probable to me. As this is a point of some difficulty and importance, you will suffer me to explain it at some length.

It must be owned, that there are several passages in the writings of the Apostles, which, at the first view, seem to countenance the opinion you have adopted. Now, says St. Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, *it is high time to awake out of sleep ; for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed : The night is far spent, the day is at hand.* And in his first epistle to the Thessalonians, he comforts such of them as were sorrowing for the loss of their friends, by assuring them, that they were not lost forever ; but that the Lord, when he came, would bring them with him ; and that they would not, in the participation of any blessings, be in any wise behind those, who should happen then to be alive ; *we*, says he (the Christians of whatever age or country, agreeable to a frequent use of the pronoun *we*)
which

which are alive, and remain unto the coming of the Lord, shall not prevent them which are asleep; for the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel; and with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then, we which are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord. In his epistle to the Philippians, he exhorts his Christian brethren not to disquiet themselves with carking cares about their temporal concerns; from this powerful consideration, that the Lord was at hand; *let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand; be careful about nothing.* The Apostle to the Hebrews inculcates the same doctrine, admonishing his converts *to provoke one another to love, and to good works; and so much the more, as they saw the day approaching.* The age in which the Apostles lived, is frequently called by them the end of the world, the last days, the last hour. I think it unnecessary, Sir, to trouble you with an explication of these and other similar texts of Scripture, which are usually adduced in support of your opinion; since I hope to be able to give you a direct proof, that the Apostles neither comforted themselves, nor encouraged others

others with the delightful hope of seeing their Master coming again into the world. It is evident then, that St. John, who survived all the other Apostles, could not have had any such expectation; since in the Book of the Revelation, the future events of the Christian church, which were not to take place, many of them, till a long series of years after his death, and some of which have not yet been accomplished, are there minutely described. St. Peter, in like manner, strongly intimates, that the day of the Lord might be said to be at hand, though it was at the distance of a thousand years or more; for in replying to the taunt of those who did then, or should in future ask, *Where is the promise of his coming?* he says, *Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day: The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness.* And he speaks of putting off his tabernacle, as the Lord had shewed him; and of his endeavour, that the Christians after his decease might be able to have these things in remembrance: So that it is past a doubt, he could not be of opinion, that the Lord would come in his time. As to St. Paul, upon
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a partial view of whose writings the doctrine concerning the speedy coming of Christ is principally founded ; it is manifest, that he was conscious he should not live to see it, notwithstanding the expression before mentioned, *we which are alive* ; for he foretels his own death in express terms—*the time of my departure is at hand* ; and he speaks of his reward, not as immediately to be conferred on him ; but as laid up, and reserved for him till some future day—*I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course ; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.* There is moreover one passage in his writings, which is so express, and full to the purpose, that it will put the matter, I think, beyond all doubt ; it occurs in his second Epistle to the Thessalonians : They, it seems, had either by misrepresenting some parts of his former letter to them, or by the preaching of some, who had not the spirit of truth ; by some means or other, they had been led to expect the speedy coming of Christ, and been greatly disturbed in mind upon that account : To remove this error, he writes to them in the following very solemn and affectionate manner ;

manner ; We beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of the Lord is at hand ; let no man deceive you by any means.

He then goes on to describe a falling away, a great corruption of the Christian church, which was to happen before the day of the Lord : Now by this revelation of the man of sin, this mystery of iniquity, which is to be consumed with the spirit of his mouth, destroyed with the brightness of his coming, we have every reason to believe, is to be understood the past and present abominations of the church of Rome. How then can it be said of Paul, who clearly foresaw this corruption above seventeen hundred years ago, that he expected the coming of the Lord in his own day ? Let us press, Sir, the mysterious language of prophecy and revelation, as closely as you please ; but let us press it truly ; and we may, perhaps, find reason from thence to receive, with less reluctance, a religion which describes a corruption, the strangeness of which, had it not been foretold in unequivocal terms, might have amazed even a friend to Christianity.

I WILL

I will produce you, Sir, a prophecy, which the more closely you press it, the more reason you will have to believe, that the speedy coming of Christ could never have been *predicted* by the Apostles. Take it, as translated by Bishop Newton : *But the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times, some shall apostatize from the faith ; giving heed to erroneous spirits, and doctrines concerning demons, through the hypocrisy of liars ; having their conscience seared with a red hot iron ; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats.*—Here you have an express prophecy—the Spirit hath spoken it—that in the latter times—not immediately, but at some distant period—some should apostatize from the faith—some, who had been Christians, should in truth be so no longer—but should give heed to erroneous spirits, and doctrines concerning demons :—Press this expression closely, and you may, perhaps, discover in it the erroneous tenets, and the demon, or saint worship of the church of Rome ;—through the hypocrisy of liars :—You recognize, no doubt, the priesthood, and the martyrologists ;—having their conscience seared with a red hot iron :—Callous, indeed, must his conscience be, who traf-

fics in indulgences ;—forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats :—This language needs no pressing ; it discovers, at once, the unhappy votaries of monastic life, and the mortal sin of eating flesh on fast days.

If, notwithstanding what has been said, you should still be of opinion, that the Apostles expected Christ would come in their time ; it will not follow, that this their error ought in any wise to diminish their authority as preachers of the Gospel. I am sensible this position may alarm even some well-wishers to Christianity ; and supply its enemies with, what they will think, an irrefragable argument : The Apostles, they will say, were inspired with the spirit of truth ; and yet they fell into a gross mistake, concerning a matter of great importance ; how is this to be reconciled ? Perhaps, in the following manner : When the time of our Saviour's ministry was nearly at an end, he thought proper to raise the spirits of his disciples, who were quite cast down with what he had told them about his design of leaving them ; by promising, that he would send to them the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth ; who should teach them all things, and lead them
into

into all truth. And we know, that this his promise was accomplished on the day of Pentecost, when they were all filled with the Holy Ghost ; and we know farther, that from that time forward, they were enabled to speak with tongues, to work miracles, to preach the word with power, and to comprehend the mystery of the new dispensation, which was committed unto them. But we have no reason from hence to conclude, that they were immediately inspired with the apprehension of whatever might be known ; that they became acquainted with all kinds of truth : They were undoubtedly led into such truths, as it was necessary for them to know, in order to their converting the world to Christianity ; but in other things, they were probably left to the exercise of their understandings, as other men usually are. But surely they might be proper witnesses of the life and resurrection of Christ, though they were not acquainted with every thing, which might have been known ; though in particular, they were ignorant of the precise time, when our Lord would come to judge the world. It can be no impeachment, either of their integrity as men, or their ability as historians, or their honesty as

preachers of the gospel, that they were unacquainted with what had never been revealed to them ; that they followed their own understandings, where they had no better light to guide them ; speaking from conjecture, when they could not speak from certainty ; of themselves, when they had no commandment of the Lord. They knew but in part, and they prophesied but in part ; and concerning this particular point, Jesus himself had told them, just as he was about finally to leave them, that it was not for them to *know the times and the seasons, which the Father had put in his own power.* Nor is it to be wondered at, that the Apostles were left in a state of uncertainty, concerning the time in which Christ should appear ; since Beings, far more exalted and more highly favoured of heaven than they, were under an equal degree of ignorance ; *Of that day, says our Saviour, and of that hour, knoweth no one ; no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father only.* I am afraid, Sir, I have tired you with scripture quotations ; but if I have been fortunate enough to convince you, either that the speedy coming of Christ was never expected, much less *predicted*, by the Apostles ; or that their mistake in that particular

particular expectation, can in no degree diminish the general weight of their testimony as historians, I shall not be sorry for the *ennui* I may have occasioned you.

THE doctrine of the Millennium, is the second of the circumstances which you produce, as giving weight to that of a future state; and you represent this doctrine as having been “carefully inculcated by a succession of the fathers, from Justin Martyr and Irenæus down to Lactantius;” and observe, that when “the edifice of the church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside;” and in the notes, you refer us, as a proof of what you advance, to, “Irenæus, the disciple of Papias, who had seen the Apostle St. John,” and to the second Dialogue of Justin with Trypho.

I wish, Sir, you had turned to Eusebius, for the character of this Papias, who had seen the Apostle St. John; you would there have found him represented as little better than a credulous old woman; very averse from reading, but mightily given to picking up stories and traditions next to fabulous; amongst which Eusebius reckons this of the Millennium one. Nor is it, I apprehend, quite certain, that Pa-

pias ever saw, much less discoursed, as seems to be insinuated, with the Apostle St. John. Eusebius thinks rather, that it was John the presbyter he had seen. But what if he had seen the Apostle himself? many a weak-headed man had undoubtedly seen him, as well as Papias; and it would be hard indeed upon Christians, if they were compelled to receive as apostolical traditions, the wild reveries of antient enthusiasm, or such crude conceptions of ignorant fanaticism, as nothing but the rust of antiquity can render venerable.

As to the works of Justin, the very Dialogue you refer to contains a proof, that the doctrine of the Millennium had not, even in his time, the universal reception you have supposed; but that many Christians of pure and pious principles rejected it. I wonder how this passage escaped you; but it may be, that you followed Tillotson, who himself followed Mede, and read in the original *α*, instead of *αυ*; and thus unwarily violated the idiom of the language, the sense of the context, and the authority of the best editions*. In the
note

* Justin, in answering the question proposed by Trypho, whether the Christians believed the doctrine of the

note you observe, that it is unnecessary for you to mention all the intermediate fathers between Justin and Lactantius, as the fact, you say, is not disputed. In a man, who has read so many books, and to so good a purpose, he must be captious indeed, who cannot excuse small mistakes: That unprejudiced regard to truth, however, which is the great characteristic of every distinguished historian, will, I am persuaded, make you thank me for recalling to your memory, that Origen, the most learned of all the fathers, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, usually for his immense erudition surnamed the Great, were both of them prior to Lactantius, and both of them impugnors of the Millennium doctrine. Look, Sir, into Mosheim, or almost

the Millennium, says, *Ὁμολογήσα ἔν σοι καὶ πρότερον, ὅτι ἐγὼ μὴ καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ ταῦτα φρονέμεν, ὡς καὶ πάντως ἐπιστάςδε, τὸ το γένησόμενον. Πολλὰς δ' αὖ καὶ τῶν τῆς ΚΑΘΑΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΥΣΕΒΟΥΣ οὐτῶν Χριστιανῶν ΓΝΩΜΗΣ τὸ το μὴ γινώριζεν, ἐσημάνα σοι.* The note subjoined to this passage out of Justin, in Thirlby's Ed. an. 1722, is, [*Πολλὰς δ' αὖ καὶ τῶν τῆς καθαρᾶς.*] Medus (quem sequitur Tillotsonus, Reg. Fidei per. iii. sect. 9, p. 756, & seq.) legit τῶν καὶ τῆς καθαρᾶς. Vehementer errant viri præclari.

And in Jebb's Edit. an. 1719, we have the following note: *Doctrina itaque de Millennio, neque erat universalis ecclesiæ traditio, nec opinio de fide recepta, &c.*

most any writer of ecclesiastical history ; and you will find the opposition of Origen and Dionysius to this system particularly noticed ; Look into so common an author as Whitby ; and in his learned treatise upon this subject, you will find he has well proved these two propositions ; first, that this opinion of the Millennium was never generally received in the church of Christ ; secondly, that there is no just ground to think it was derived from the Apostles. From hence I think we may conclude, that this Millennium doctrine (which, by the bye, though it be new modelled, is not yet thrown aside) could not have been any very serviceable scaffold, in the erection of that mighty edifice, which has crused by the weight of its materials, and debased by the elegance of its structure, the stateliest temples of heathen superstition. With these remarks, I take leave of the Millennium ; just observing, that your third circumstance, the general conflagration, seems to be effectually included in your first, the speedy coming of Christ.

I am, &c.

LETTER



LETTER THIRD.

S I R,

YOU esteem “the miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church,” as the third of the secondary causes of the rapid growth of Christianity; I should be willing to account the miracles, not merely ascribed to the primitive church, but really performed by the Apostles, as the one great primary cause of the conversion of the Gentiles. But waving this consideration, let us see whether the miraculous powers, which you ascribe to the primitive church, were in any eminent degree calculated to spread the belief of Christianity amongst a great and an enlightened people.

THEY consisted, you tell us, “of divine inspirations, conveyed sometimes in the form of a sleeping, sometimes of a waking vision; and were liberally bestowed on all ranks of
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the faithful, on women as on elders, on boys as well as upon Bishops." "The design of these visions, you say, was for the most part either to disclose the future history, or to guide the present administration of the church." "You speak of the expulsion of demons as an ordinary triumph of religion, usually performed in a public manner; and when the patient was relieved by the skill or the power of the exorcist, the vanquished demon was heard to confess, that he was one of the fabled gods of antiquity, who had impiously usurped the adoration of mankind;" and you represent even the miracle of the resurrection of the dead, as frequently performed on necessary occasions.—Cast your eye, Sir, upon the church of Rome, and ask yourself (I put the question to your heart, and beg you will consult that for an answer; ask yourself) whether her absurd pretensions to that very kind of miraculous powers, you have here displayed as operating to the increase of Christianity, have not converted half her numbers to Protestantism, and the other half to infidelity? Neither the sword of the civil magistrate, nor the possession of the keys of heaven, nor the terrors of her spiritual thunder,

thunder, have been able to keep within her pale, even those who have been bred up in her faith ; how then should you think, that the very cause, which hath almost extinguished Christianity amongst Christians, should have established it amongst Pagans ? I beg I may not be misunderstood ; I do not take upon me to say, that all the miracles recorded in the history of the primitive church after the apostolical age, were forgeries ; it is foreign to the present purpose to deliver any opinion upon that subject ; but I do beg leave to insist upon this, that such of them as were forgeries, must in that learned age, by their easy detection, have rather impeded, than accelerated the progress of Christianity : And it appears very probable to me, that nothing but the recent prevailing evidence, of real, unquestioned, apostolical miracles, could have secured the infant church from being destroyed by those, which were falsely ascribed to it.

It is not every man, who can nicely separate the corruptions of religion from religion itself ; nor justly apportion the degrees of credit due to the diversities of evidence ;
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and those, who have ability for the task, are usually ready enough to emancipate themselves from gospel restraints (which thwart the propensities of sense, check the ebullitions of passion, and combat the prejudices of the world at every turn) by blending its native simplicity with the superstitions which have been derived from it. No argument so well suited to the indolence or the immorality of mankind, as that priests of all ages and religions are the same; we see the pretensions of the Romish priesthood to miraculous powers, and we know them to be false; we are conscious, that they at least must sacrifice their integrity to their interest, or their ambition; and being persuaded, that there is a great sameness in the passions of mankind, and in their incentives to action; and knowing that the history of past ages is abundantly stored with similar claims to supernatural authority, we traverse back in imagination the most distant regions of antiquity; and finding from a superficial view nothing to discriminate one set of men or period of time from another; we hastily conclude, that all revealed religion is a cheat, and that

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the miracles attributed to the Apostles themselves, are supported by no better testimony, nor more worthy our attention, than the prodigies of Pagan story, or the lying wonders of Papal artifice. I have no intention in this place, to enlarge upon the many circumstances, by which a candid enquirer after truth might be enabled to distinguish a pointed difference between the miracles of Christ and his Apostles, and the tricks of ancient or modern superstition. One observation I would just suggest to you upon the subject; the miracles recorded in the old and new Testament, are so intimately united with the narration of common events, and the ordinary transactions of life, that you cannot, as in profane history, separate the one from the other.—My meaning will be illustrated by an instance; Tacitus and Suetonius have handed down to us an account of many great actions performed by Vespasian; amongst the rest, they inform us of his having wrought some miracles, of his having cured a lame man, and restored sight to one that was blind.—But what they tell of these miracles, is so unconnected with every thing that goes before and after, that you may reject the relation

tion of them without injuring, in any degree, the consistency of the narration of the other circumstances of his life : On the other hand, if you reject the relation of the miracles said to have been performed by Jesus Christ, you must necessarily reject the account of his whole life, and of several transactions, concerning which we have the undoubted testimony of other writers besides the Evangelists. But if this argument should not strike you, perhaps the following observation may tend to remove a little of the prejudice, usually conceived against gospel miracles, by men of lively imaginations, from the gross forgeries attributed to the first ages of the church.

THE phænomena of physics are sometimes happily illustrated by an hypothesis ; and the most recondite truths of mathematical science not unfrequently investigated, from an absurd position ; what if we should try the same method of arguing in the case before us. Let us suppose then, that a new revelation was to be promulged to mankind, and that twelve unlearned and unfriended men, inhabitants of any country most odious and despicable in the eyes of Europe, should by the power of
God

God be endowed with the faculty of speaking languages they had never learned, and performing works surpassing all human ability; and that being strongly impressed with a particular truth, which they were commissioned to promulgate, they should travel not only through the barbarous regions of Africa, but through all the learned and polished states of Europe; preaching every where, with unremitting sedulity a new religion, working stupendous miracles in attestation of their mission, and communicating to their first converts (as a seal of their conversion) a variety of spiritual gifts; does it appear probable to you, that after the death of these men, and probably after the deaths of most of their immediate successors, who had been zealously attached to the faith they had seen so miraculously confirmed, that none would ever attempt to impose upon the credulous or the ignorant, by a fictitious claim to supernatural powers? would none of them aspire to the gift of tongues? would none of them mistake phrenzy for illumination, and the delusions of a heated brain for the impulses of the spirit? would none undertake to cure inveterate disorders, to expel demons, or to raise the

E. dead?

dead? As far as I can apprehend, we ought, from such a position, to deduce, by every rule of probable reasoning, the precise conclusion which was in fact verified in the case of the Apostles; every species of miracles, which heaven had enabled the first preachers to perform, would be counterfeited, either from misguided zeal, or interested cunning; either through the imbecility or the iniquity of mankind; and we might just as reasonably conclude, that there never was any piety, charity or chastity in the world, from seeing such plenty of pretenders to these virtues, as that there never were any real miracles performed, from considering the great store of those which have been forged.

BUT, I know not how it has happened, there are many in the present age (I am far from including you, Sir, in the number) whose prejudices against all miraculous events have arisen to that height, that it appears to them utterly impossible for any human testimony, however great, to establish their credibility. I beg pardon for styling their reasoning, prejudice; I have no design to give offence by that word; they may, with equal right, throw
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the same imputation upon mine; and I think it just as illiberal in divines, to attribute the scepticism of every Deist to wilful infidelity, as it is in the Deists, to refer the faith of every Divine to professional bias. I have not had so little intercourse with mankind, nor shunned so much the delightful freedom of social converse, as to be ignorant, that there are many men of upright morals and good understandings, to whom, as you express it, "a latent and even involuntary scepticism adheres;" and who would be glad to be persuaded to be Christians: And how severe soever some men may be in their judgments concerning one another; yet we Christians at least, hope, and believe, that the great Judge of all will make allowance for "our habits of study and reflection," for various circumstances, the efficacy of which, in giving a particular bent to the understandings of men, we can neither comprehend nor estimate. For the sake of such men, if such should ever be induced to throw an hour away in the perusal of these letters, suffer me to step for a moment out of my way,

whilst I hazard an observation or two upon the subject.

KNOWLEDGE is rightly divided by Mr. Locke into intuitive, sensitive, and demonstrative; it is clear, that a past miracle can neither be the object of sense, nor of intuition, nor consequently of demonstration; we cannot then, philosophically speaking, be said to know, that a miracle has ever been performed. But in all the great concerns of life, we are influenced by probability, rather than knowledge: And of probability, the same great author establishes two foundations; a conformity to our own experience, and the testimony of others. Now it is contended, that by the opposition of these two principles, probability is destroyed; or, in other terms, that human testimony can never influence the mind to assent to a proposition repugnant to uniform experience.—Whose experience do you mean? you will not say your own; for the experience of an individual reaches but a little way; and no doubt you daily assent to a thousand truths in politics, in physics, and in the business of common

mon life, which you have never seen verified by experience.—You will not produce the experience of your friends; for that can extend itself but a little way beyond your own.—But by uniform experience, I conceive, you are desirous of understanding the experience of all ages and nations since the foundation of the world. I answer, first; how is it, that you become acquainted with the experience of all ages and nations? You will reply, from history.—Be it so:—Peruse then, by far the most ancient records of antiquity; and if you find no mention of miracles in them, I give up the point. Yes;—but every thing related therein respecting miracles, is to be reckoned fabulous.—Why?—Because miracles contradict the experience of all ages and nations. Do you not perceive, Sir, that you beg the very question in debate? for we affirm, that the great and learned nation of Egypt, that the Heathen inhabiting the land of Canaan, that the numerous people of the Jews, and the nations, which, for ages, surrounded them, have all had great experience of miracles. You cannot otherways ob-

viate this conclusion, than by questioning the authenticity of that book, concerning which, Newton, when he was writing his Commentary on Daniel, expressed himself to the person*, from whom I had the anecdote, and which deserves not to be lost; "I find more sure marks of authenticity in the Bible, than in any profane history whatsoever."

HOWEVER, I mean not to press you with the argument *ad verecundiam*; it is needless to solicit your modesty, when it may be possible, perhaps, to make an impression upon your judgment: I answer, therefore, in the second place, that the admission of the principle, by which you reject miracles, will lead us into absurdity. The laws of gravitation, are the most obvious of all the laws of nature; every person in every part of the globe, must of necessity have had experience of them: There was a time, when no one was acquainted with the laws of magnetism; these suspend in many instances the laws of gravity; nor can I see, upon the principle in question, how the rest of mankind could have credited the testimony of their first discoverer;

* Dr. Smith, late Master of Trinity College.

verer; and yet to have rejected it, would have been to reject the truth. But that a piece of iron should ascend gradually from the earth, and fly at last with an increasing rapidity through the air; and attaching itself to another piece of iron, or to a particular species of iron ore, should remain suspended in opposition to the action of its gravity, is consonant to the laws of nature.—I grant it; but there was a time when it was contrary, I say not to the laws of nature, but to the uniform experience of all preceding ages and countries; and at that particular point of time, the testimony of an individual, or of a dozen individuals, who should have reported themselves eye witnesses of such a fact, ought, according to your argumentation, to have been received as fabulous. And what are those laws of nature, which, you think, can never be suspended? are they not different to different men, according to the diversities of their comprehension and knowledge? and if any one of them (that, for instance, which rules the operations of magnetism or electricity) should have been known to you or to me alone, whilst all the rest of the world were unac-

quainted with it; the effects of it would have been new, and unheard of in the annals, and contrary to the experience of mankind; and therefore ought not, in your opinion, to have been believed. Nor do I understand, what difference, as to credibility, there could be, between the effects of such an unknown law of nature, and a miracle; for it is a matter of no moment, in that view, whether the suspension of the known laws of nature be effected; that is, whether a miracle be performed, by the mediation of other laws that are unknown, or by the ministry of a person divinely commissioned; since it is impossible for us to be certain, that it is contradictory to the constitution of the universe, that the laws of nature, which appear to us general, should not be suspended, and their action overruled by others, still more general, though less known; that is, that miracles should not be performed before such a Being as Man, at those times, in those places, and under those circumstances, which God, in his universal providence, had preordained.

I am, &c.

LETTER



LETTER FOURTH.

SIR,

I READILY acknowledge the utility of your fourth cause, “the virtues of the first Christians,” as greatly conducing to the spreading their religion; but then you seem to quite mar the compliment you pay them, by representing their virtues, as proceeding either from their repentance for having been the most abandoned sinners, or from the laudable desire of supporting the reputation of the society, in which they were engaged.

THAT repentance is the first step to virtue, is true enough; but I see no reason for supposing, according to the calumnies of Celsus and Julian, “that the Christians allured into their party, men, who washed away in the waters of baptism the guilt, for which the temples of the gods refused

refused to grant them any expiation." The Apostles, Sir, did not, like Romulus, open an asylum for debtors, thieves, and murderers; for they had not the same sturdy means of securing their adherents from the grasp of civil power; they did not persuade them to abandon the temples of the gods, because they could there obtain no expiation for their guilt; but because every degree of guilt was expiated in them with too great facility; and every vice practised, not only without remorse of private conscience, but with the powerful sanction of public approbation.

"AFTER the example, you say, of their Divine Master, the missionaries of the gospel addressed themselves to men, and especially to women, oppressed by the consciousness, and very often by the effects of their vices."—

This, Sir, I really think is not a fair representation of the matter; it may catch the applause of the unlearned, embolden many a stripling to cast off forever the sweet blush of modesty, confirm many a dissolute veteran in the practice of his impure habits, and suggest great occasion of merriment and wanton mockery to the flagitious of every denomination and every age;

but

but still it will want that foundation of truth, which alone can recommend it to the serious and judicious. The Apostles, Sir, were not like the Italian *Fratricelli* of the thirteenth, nor the French *Turlupins* of the fourteenth century; in all the dirt that has been raked up against Christianity, even by the worst of its enemies, not a speck of that kind have they been able to fix, either upon the Apostles, or their Divine Master. The gospel of Jesus Christ, Sir, was not preached in single houses, or obscure villages, not in subterraneous caves and impure brothels, not in lazars and in prisons; but in the synagogues and in the temples, in the streets and in the market-places of the great capitals of the Roman provinces; in Jerusalem, in Corinth, and in Antioch, in Athens, in Ephesus, and in Rome. Nor do I any where find, that its missionaries were ordered particularly to address themselves to the shameless women you mention; I do indeed find the direct contrary; for they were ordered to turn away from, to have no fellowship or intercourse with such, as were wont to creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts. And what if a few women, who had either
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been seduced by their passions, or had fallen victims to the licentious manners of their age, should be found amongst those, who were most ready to receive a religion, that forbid all impurity ? I do not apprehend, that this circumstance ought to bring an insinuation of discredit either upon the sex, or upon those who wrought their reformation.

THAT the majority of the first converts to Christianity, were of an inferior condition in life, may readily be allowed ; and you yourself have in another place given a good reason for it ; those who are distinguished by riches, honours, or knowledge, being so very inconsiderable in number, when compared with the bulk of mankind : But though not many mighty, not many noble, were called ; yet some mighty, and some noble, some of as great reputation as any of the age in which they lived, were attached to the Christian faith. Short indeed are the accounts, which have been transmitted to us, of the first propagating of Christianity ; yet even in these, we meet with the names of many, who would have done credit to any cause. I will not pretend to enumerate them all ; a few of them will be sufficient to make you recollect,

that

that there were, at least, some converts to Christianity, both from among the Jews and the Gentiles, whose lives were not stained with inexplorable crimes. Amongst these, we reckon Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; Joseph of Arimathea, a man of fortune and a counsellor; a nobleman and a centurion of Capernaum; Jairus, Crispus, Sosthenes, rulers of synagogues; Apollos, an eloquent and learned man; Zenas, a Jewish lawyer, the treasurer of Candace, queen of Æthiopia; Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian band; Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus at Athens, and Sergius Paulus, a man of proconsular or prætorian authority, of whom it may be remarked, that if he resigned his high and lucrative office in consequence of his turning Christian, it is a strong presumption in its favour; if he retained it, we may conclude, that the profession of Christianity was not so utterly incompatible with the discharge of the offices of civil life, as you sometimes represent it. This catalogue of men of rank, fortune and knowledge, who embraced Christianity, might, was it necessary, be much enlarged; and probably another conversation with St. Paul would have enabled us to grace it with the names of Fes-

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tus, and king Agrippa himself; not that the writers of the Books of the New Testament seem to have been at all solicitous, in mentioning the great or the learned, who were converted to the faith; had that been part of their design, they would, in the true stile of impostors, have kept out of sight the publicans and sinners, the tanners and the tent-makers with whom they conversed and dwelt; and introduced to our notice none but those, who had been *brought up with Herod, or the chief men of Asia*—whom they had the honour to number amongst their friends.

THAT the primitive Christians took great care to have an unfullied reputation, by abstaining from the commission of whatever might tend to pollute it, is easily admitted; but we do not so easily grant, that this care is a “a circumstance, which usually attends small assemblies of men, when they separate themselves from the body of a nation, or the religion to which they belong.” It did not attend the Nicolaitanes, the Simonians, the Menandrians, and the Carpocratians, in the first ages of the church, of which you are speaking; and it cannot be unknown to you, Sir, that the scandalous vices of
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these very early Sectaries, brought a general and undistinguished censure upon the Christian name; and so far from promoting the increase of the church, excited in the minds of the Pagans an abhorrence of whatever respected it; it cannot be unknown to you, Sir, that several Sectaries both at home and abroad might be mentioned, who have departed from the religion to which they belonged; and which, unhappily for themselves and the community, have taken as little care to preserve their reputation unspotted, as those of the first and second centuries. If then the first Christians did take the care you mention (and I am wholly of your opinion in that point) their solicitude might as candidly, perhaps, and as reasonably be derived from a sense of their duty, and an honest endeavour to discharge it, as from the mere desire of increasing the honour of their confraternity by the illustrious integrity of its members.

You are eloquent in describing the austere morality of the primitive Christians, as adverse to the propensities of sense, and abhorrent from all the innocent pleasures and amusements of life; and you enlarge, with a studied minuteness, upon their censures of luxury, and their sentiments

sentiments concerning marriage and chastity ;— but in this circumstantial enumeration of their errors or their faults (which I am under no necessity of denying or excusing) you seem to forget the very purpose, for which you profess to have introduced the mention of them ; for the picture you have drawn is so hideous, and the colouring so dismal, that instead of alluring to a closer inspection, it must have made every man of pleasure or of sense turn from it with horror or disgust ; and so far from contributing to the rapid growth of Christianity by the austerity of their manners, it must be a wonder to any one, how the first Christians ever made a single convert.—It was first objected by Celsus, that Christianity was a mean religion, inculcating such a pusillanimity and patience under affronts, such a contempt of riches and worldly honours, as must weaken the nerves of civil government, and expose a society of Christians to the prey of the first invaders. This objection has been repeated by Bayle ; and though fully answered by Bernard and others, it is still the favourite theme of every Esprit fort of our own age : Even you, Sir, think the aversion of Christians to the business of war and government,

ment, “ a criminal disregard to the public welfare.” To all that has been said upon this subject, it may with justice, I think, be answered, that Christianity troubles not itself with ordering the constitutions of civil societies ; but levels the weight of all its influence at the hearts of the individuals which compose them ; and, as Origen said to Celsus, was every individual in every nation a gospel Christian, there would be neither internal injustice, nor external war ; there would be none of those passions, which imbitter the intercourses of civil life, and desolate the globe. What reproach then can it be to a religion, that it inculcates doctrines, which, if universally practised, would introduce universal tranquility and the most exalted happiness amongst mankind ?

It must proceed from a total misapprehension of the design of the Christian dispensation, or from a very ignorant interpretation of the particular injunctions, forbidding us to make riches or honours a primary pursuit, or the prompt gratification of revenge a first principle of action, to infer,—that an individual Christian is obliged by his religion to offer his throat to an assassin, and his property to the first plun-

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derer; or that a society of Christians may not repel, in the best manner they are able, the unjust assaults of hostile invasion.

I KNOW of no precepts in the gospel, which debar a man from the possession of domestic comforts, or deaden the activity of his private friendships, or prohibit the exertion of his utmost ability in the service of the public; the —*nisi quietum nihil beatum*—is no part of the Christian's Creed; his virtue, is an active virtue; and we justly refer to the school of Epicurus, the doctrines concerning abstinence from marriage, from the cultivation of friendship, from the management of public affairs, as suited to that selfish indolence, which was the favourite tenet of his philosophy.

I am, &c.

LETTER



LETTER FIFTH.

S I R,

“**T**HE union and the discipline of the Christian church,” or, as you are pleased to stile it, of the Christian republic, is the last of the five secondary causes, to which you have referred the rapid and extensive spread of Christianity. It must be acknowledged that union essentially contributes to the strength of every association, civil, military, and religious; but unfortunately for your argument, and much to the reproach of Christians, nothing has been more wanting amongst them, from the apostolic age to our own, than union. *I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ,* are expressions of disunion, which we meet with in the earliest period of church history; and we cannot look into the writings of any, either

friend or foe to Christianity, but we find the one of them lamenting, and the other exulting in an immense catalogue of sectaries; and both of them thereby furnishing us with great reason to believe, that the divisions with respect to doctrine, worship, and discipline, which have ever subsisted in the church, must have greatly tended to hurt the credit of Christianity, and to alienate the minds of the Gentiles from the reception of such a various and discordant faith.

I READILY grant, that there was a certain community of doctrine, an intercourse of hospitality, and a confederacy of discipline, established amongst the individuals of every church; so that none could be admitted into any assembly of Christians, without undergoing a previous examination into his manner of life* (which shews, by the bye, that every reprobate could not, as the fit seized him, or his interest induced him, become a Christian) and without protesting in the most solemn manner, that he would neither be guilty of murder, nor adultery, nor theft, nor perfidy; and it may be granted also, that

* Nonnulli præpositi sunt, qui in vitam et mores eorum, qui admittuntur, inquirant, ut non concessa facientes candidatos religionis arceant a suis conventibus. Orig. Con. Cel. Lib. 2.

that those who broke this compact, were ejected by common consent from the confraternity into which they had been admitted ; it may be further granted, that this confederacy extended itself to independent churches ; and that those who had, for their immoralities, been excluded from Christian community in any one church, were rarely, if ever, admitted to it by another ; just as a member, who has been expelled any one College in an University, is generally thought unworthy of being admitted by any other : But it is not admitted, that this severity and this union of discipline could ever have induced the Pagans to forsake the gods of their country, and to expose themselves to the contemptuous hatred of their neighbours, and to all the severities of persecution exercised, with unrelenting barbarity, against the Christians.

THE account you give of the origin and progress of the episcopal jurisdiction, of the pre-eminence of the metropolitan churches, and of the ambition of the Roman Pontiff, I believe to be in general accurate and true ; and I am not in the least surprized at the bitterness, which now and then escapes you in treating this subject ; for, to see the most benign religion that imagination can

form, becoming an instrument of oppression; and the most humble one administering to the pride, the avarice, and the ambition of those, who wish to be considered as its guardians, and who avowed themselves its professors; would extort a censure from men more attached probably to church authority than yourself: Not that I think it either a very candid or a very useful undertaking, to be solely and industriously engaged in portraying the characters of the professors of Christianity in the worst colours; it is not candid, because "the great law of impartiality, which obliges an historian to reveal the imperfections of the uninspired teachers and believers of the gospel," obliges him also not to conceal, or to pass over with niggard and reluctant mention, the illustrious virtues of those, who gave up fortune and fame, all their comforts, and all their hopes in this life, nay, life itself, rather than violate any one of the precepts of that gospel, which, from the testimony of inspired teachers, they conceived they had good reason to believe; it is not useful, because "to a careless observer, (that is, to the generality of mankind) "*their* faults may seem to cast a shade on the faith, which they professed;" and may really infect
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the minds of the young and unlearned especially, with prejudices against a religion, upon their rational reception or rejection of which, a matter of the utmost importance may (believe me, Sir, it may, for aught you or any person else can prove to the contrary) entirely depend. It is an easy matter to amuse ourselves and others with the immoralities of priests, and the ambition of prelates, with the absurd virulence of synods and councils, with the ridiculous doctrines, which visionary enthusiasts or interested churchmen have sanctified with the name of Christian; but a display of ingenuity or erudition upon such subjects is much misplaced; since it excites almost in every person, an unavoidable suspicion of the purity of the source itself, from which such polluted streams have been derived. Do not mistake my meaning; I am far from wishing, that the clergy should be looked up to with a blind reverence, or their imperfections screened by the sanctity of their function, from the animadversion of the world: Quite the contrary; their conduct, I am of opinion, ought to be more nicely scrutinized, and their deviation from the rectitude of the gospel more severely censured, than that of other men; but

great care should be taken not to represent *their* vices, or *their* indiscretions, as originating in the principles of their religion. Do not mistake me ; I am not here begging quarter for Christianity ; or contending, that even the principles of our religion should be received with implicit faith ; or that every objection to Christianity should be stifled, by a representation of the mischief it might do, if publicly promulged ; on the contrary, we invite, nay, we challenge you to a direct and liberal attack ; though oblique glances, and disingenuous insinuations, we are willing to avoid ; well knowing, that the character of our religion, like that of an honest man, is defended with greater difficulty against the suggestions of ridicule, and the secret malignity of pretended friends, than against positive accusations, and the avowed malice of open enemies.

IN your account of the primitive church, you set forth, that “ the want of discipline and human learning, was supplied by the occasional assistance of the prophets ; who were called to that function, without distinction of age, of sex, or of natural abilities.”—That the gift of prophecy was one of the spiritual gifts, by which some of the first Christians were enabled to co-
operate

operate with the Apostles, in the general design of preaching the Gospel; and that this gift, or rather, as Mr. Locke thinks, the gift of tongues, (by the ostentation of which, many of them were prompted to speak in their assemblies at the same time) was the occasion of some disorder in the church of Corinth, which required the interposition of the Apostle to compose, is confessed on all hands. But if you mean, that the prophets were ever the sole pastors of the faithful; or that no provision was made by the Apostles for the good government and edification of the church, except what might be accidentally derived from the occasional assistance of the prophets, you are much mistaken; and have undoubtedly forgot, what is said of Paul and Barnabas having ordained elders in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch; and of Paul's commission to Titus, whom he had left in Crete, to ordain elders in every city; and of his instructions both to him and Timothy, concerning the qualifications of those, whom they were to appoint bishops: One of which was, that a bishop should be able, by sound doctrine, to exhort and to convince the gain-sayer; nor is it said, that this sound doctrine was to be communicated

municated to the bishop by prophecy, or that all persons, without distinction, might be called to that office ; but a bishop was *to be able to teach*, not what he had learned by prophecy, but what Paul had publicly preached ; *the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also*. And in every place almost, where prophets are mentioned, they are joined with Apostles and teachers, and other ministers of the gospel ; so that there is no reason for your representing them as a distinct order of men, who were by their occasional assistance to supply the want of discipline and human learning in the church. It would be taking too large a field, to enquire whether the prophets, you speak of, were endowed with ordinary or extraordinary gifts ; whether they always spoke by the immediate impulse of the Spirit, or according to *the analogy of faith* ; whether their gift consisted in the foretelling of future events, or in the interpreting of scripture, to the edification and exhortation and comfort of the church, or in both : I will content myself with observing, that he will judge very improperly concerning the prophets of the apostolic church,

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who takes his idea of their office or importance from your description of them.

IN speaking of the community of goods, which, you say, was adopted for a short time in the primitive church, you hold as inconclusive the arguments of Mosheim ; who has endeavoured to prove, that it was a community quite different from that recommended by Pythagoras or Plato ; consisting principally in a common use, derived from an unbounded liberality, which induced the opulent to share their riches with their indigent brethren ; there have been others, as well as Mosheim, who have entertained this opinion ; and it is not quite so indefensible, as you represent it ; but whether it be reasonable or absurd, need not now be examined : It is far more necessary to take notice of an expression which you have used, and which may be apt to mislead unwary readers into a very injurious suspicion, concerning the integrity of the Apostles. In process of time you observe, “ the converts, who embraced the new religion, were permitted to retain the possession of their patrimony.”—This expression, *permitted to retain*, in ordinary acceptation, implies an antecedent obligation to part with :

Now,

Now, Sir, I have not the shadow of a doubt in affirming, that we have no account in scripture of any such obligation being imposed upon the converts to Christianity, either by Christ himself, or by his Apostles, or by any other authority : Nay, in the very place where this community of goods is treated of, there is an express proof (I know not how your impartiality has happened to overlook it) to the contrary. When Peter was about to inflict an exemplary punishment upon Ananias (not for keeping back a part of the price, as some men are fond of representing it, but) for his lying and hypocrisy, in offering a part of the price of his land, as the whole of it ; he said to him, *whilst it remained (unfold) was it not thine own ? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power ?* From this account it is evident, that Ananias was under no obligation to part with his patrimony ; and after he had parted with it, the price was in his own power ; the Apostle would have *permitted him to retain* the whole of it, if he had thought fit ; though he would not permit his prevarication to go unpunished.

You have remarked, that “ the feasts of love, the agapæ, as they were called, constituted a
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very pleasing and essential part of public worship."—Lest any one should from hence be led to suspect, that these feasts of love; this pleasing part of the public worship of the primitive church, resembled the unhallowed meetings of some impure sectaries of our own times; I will take the liberty to add to your account, a short explication of the nature of these agapæ. Tertullian, in the 39th chapter of his Apology, has done it to my hands. "The nature of our supper, says he, is indicated by its name; it is called by a word, which, in the Greek language, signifies love. We are not anxious about the expence of the entertainment; since we look upon that as gain, which is expended with a pious purpose, in the relief and refreshment of all our indigent.—The occasion of our entertainment being so honourable, you may judge of the manner of its being conducted; it consists in the discharge of religious duties; it admits nothing vile, nothing immodest. Before we sit down, prayer is made to God. The hungry eat as much as they desire, and every one drinks as much as can be useful to sober men. We so feast, as men, who have their minds impressed with the idea of spending the night in the

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the worship of God ; we so converse, as men, who are conscious that the Lord heareth them," &c. Perhaps you may object to this testimony, in favour of the innocence of Christian meetings, as liable to partiality, because it is the testimony of a Christian ; and you may, perhaps, be able to pick out from the writings of this Christian, something that looks like a contradiction of this account : However, I will rest the matter upon this testimony for the present ; forbearing to quote any other Christian writer upon the subject, as I shall, in a future letter, produce you a testimony superior to every objection. You speak too of the agapæ, as an essential part of the public worship ; this is not according to your usual accuracy ; for, had they been essential, the edict of an heathen magistrate would not have been able to put a stop to them ; yet Pliny, in his letter to Trajan, expressly says, that the Christians left them off, upon his publishing an edict prohibiting assemblies ; and we know, that in the council of Carthage, in the fourth century, on account of the abuses which attended them, they began to be interdicted, and ceased almost universally in the fifth.

I HAVE

I HAVE but two observations to make upon what you have advanced, concerning the severity of ecclesiastical penance ; the first is, that even you yourself do not deduce its institution from the scripture ; but from the power, which every voluntary society has over its own members ; and therefore, however extravagant, or however absurd ; however opposite to the attributes of a commiserating God, or the feelings of a fallible man, it may be thought ; or upon whatever trivial occasion, such as that you mention, of calumniating a Bishop, a Presbyter, or even a Deacon, it may have been inflicted ; Christ and his Apostles are not answerable for it. The other is, that it was, of all possible expedients, the least fitted to accomplish the end for which you think it was introduced, the propagation of Christianity. The sight of a penitent humbled by a public confession, emaciated by fasting, clothed in sackcloth, prostrated at the door of the assembly, and imploring for years together the pardon of his offences, and a readmission into the bosom of the church, was a much more likely means of deterring the Pagans from Christian community, than the pious liberality you mention, was of alluring

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ring them into it. This pious liberality, Sir, would exhaust even your elegant powers of description, before you could exhibit it in the amiable manner it deserves ; it is derived from the *new commandment of loving one another* ; and it has ever been the distinguishing characteristic of Christians, as opposed to every other denomination of men, Jews, Mahometans, or Pagans. In the times of the Apostles, and in the first ages of the church, it shewed itself in voluntary contributions for the relief of the poor and the persecuted, the infirm and the unfortunate ; as soon as the church was permitted to have permanent possessions in land, and acquired the protection of the civil power, it exerted itself in the erection of hospitals of every kind ; institutions these, of charity and humanity, which were forgotten in the laws of Solon and Lycurgus ; and for even one example of which, you will, I believe, in vain explore the boasted annals of Pagan Rome. Indeed, Sir, you will think too injuriously of this liberality, if you look upon its origin as superstitious ; or upon its application as an artifice of the priesthood, to seduce the indigent into the bosom of the church ; it was the pure and uncorrupted fruit of genuine Christianity.

You

You are much *surprized*, and not a little *concerned*, that Tacitus, and the younger Pliny, have spoken so slightly of the Christian system; and that Seneca, and the elder Pliny, have not vouchsafed to mention it at all.— This difficulty seems to have struck others as well as yourself; and I might refer you to the conclusion of the second volume of Dr. Lardner's Collection of ancient Jewish and Heathen Testimonies to the Truth of the Christian Religion, for full satisfaction in this point; but perhaps an observation or two may be sufficient to diminish your surprize.

OBSCURE sectaries, of upright morals, when they separate themselves from the religion of their country, do not speedily acquire the attention of men of letters. The historians are apprehensive of depreciating the dignity of their learned labour, and contaminating their splendid narration of illustrious events, by mixing with it a disgusting detail of religious combinations; and the philosophers are usually too deeply engaged in abstract science, or in exploring the infinite intricacy of natural appearances, to busy themselves with what they, perhaps hastily, esteem popular

lar superstitions. Historians and philosophers, of no mean reputation, might be mentioned, I believe, who were the contemporaries of Luther and the first reformers; and who have passed over, in negligent or contemptuous silence, their daring and unpopular attempts to shake the stability of St. Peter's Chair. Opposition to the religion of a people must become general, before it can deserve the notice of the civil magistrate; and till it does that, it will mostly be thought below the animadversion of distinguished writers. This remark is peculiarly applicable to the case in point. The first Christians, as Christ had foretold, were *hated of all men for his name's sake*: It was the name itself, not any vices adhering to the name, which Pliny punished; and they were every where held in exceeding contempt, till their numbers excited the apprehension of the ruling powers. The philosophers considered them as enthusiasts, and neglected them; the priests opposed them as innovators, and calumniated them; the great overlooked them, the learned despised them, and the curious alone, who examined into the foundation of their faith, believed them.

But

But the negligence of some half dozen of writers, (most of them however bear incidental testimony to the truth of several facts respecting Christianity) in not relating circumstantially the origin, the progress, and the pretensions of a new sect, is a very insufficient reason for questioning either the evidence of the principles upon which it was built, or the supernatural power by which it was supported.

THE Roman historians, moreover, were not only culpably incurious concerning the Christians; but unpardonably ignorant of what concerned either them, or the Jews: I say, unpardonably ignorant, because the means of information were within their reach; the writings of Moses were every where to be had in Greek; and the works of Josephus were published, before Tacitus wrote his history; and yet even Tacitus has fallen into great absurdity, and self-contradiction, in his account of the Jews; and though Tertullian's zeal carried him much too far, when he called him *Mendaciorum loquacissimus*, yet one cannot help regretting the little pains he took to acquire proper information upon that subject. He derives the name of the Jews by a forced

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interpolation

interpolation from Mount Ida, in Crete* ; and he represents them as abhorring all kinds of images in public worship, and yet accuses them of having placed the image of an ass in the holy of holies ; and presently after he tells us, that Pompey, when he profaned the temple, found the sanctuary entirely empty. Similar inaccuracies might be noticed in Plutarch and other writers, who have spoken of the Jews ; and you yourself have referred to an obscure passage in Suetonius, as offering a proof how strangely the Jews and Christians of Rome were confounded with each other. Why then should we think it remarkable, that a few celebrated writers, who looked upon the Christians as an obscure sect of the Jews, and upon the Jews as a barbarous and detested people, whose history was not worth the perusal ; and who were moreover engaged in the relation of the great events, which either occasioned or accompanied the ruin of their eternal empire ; why should we be surprized, that men occupied in such interesting subjects,

* *Inclytum in Creta Idam montem, accolæ Idæos aucto in barbarum cognomento Judæos vocitari. Tac. Hist. L. 5, sub. Init.*

jects, and influenced by such inveterate prejudices, should have left us but short and imperfect descriptions of the Christian system?

“BUT how shall we excuse, you say, the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world, to those evidences, which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence, not to their reason, but to their senses?”—“The laws of nature were perpetually suspended for the benefit of the church: But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle.”—To their shame be it spoken, that they did so—“and pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alterations in the moral or physical government of the world.”—To this objection, I answer, in the first place, that we have no reason to believe, that miracles were performed, as often as philosophers deigned to give their attention to them; or that, at the period of time you allude to, the laws of nature were *perpetually* suspended, for the benefit of the church. It may be, that not one of the few heathen writers, whose books have escaped the ravages of time, was ever present, when a miracle was wrought; but will it follow, because Pliny, or Plutarch,

or Galen, or Seneca, or Suetonius, or Tacitus, had never seen a miracle, that no miracles were ever performed? They indeed were learned and observant men; and it may be a matter of surprize to us, that miracles so celebrated, as the friends of Christianity suppose the Christian ones to have been, should never have been mentioned by them, though they had not seen them; and had an Adrian or a Vespasian been the authors of but a thousandth part of the miracles you have ascribed to the primitive church, more than one probably of these very historians, philosophers as they were, would have adorned his history with a narration of them: For though they turned aside from the awful spectacle of the miracles of a poor despised Apostle—yet they beheld with exulting complacency, and have related with unsuspecting credulity, the ostentatious tricks of a Roman Emperor. It was not for want of faith in miraculous events, that these sages neglected the Christian miracles, but for want of candour, and impartial examination.

I ANSWER, in the second place, that in the Acts of the Apostles, we have an account
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of a great multitude of Pagans of every condition of life, who were so far from being inattentive to the evidences, which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence to their senses, that they contemplated them with reverence and wonder; and forsaking the religion of their ancestors, and all the flattering hopes of worldly profit, reputation, and tranquility, adhered with astonishing resolution to the profession of Christianity. From the conclusion of the Acts, till the time in which some of the sages you mention flourished, is a very obscure part of church history; yet we are certain, that many of the Pagan, and we have some reason to believe, that not a few of the philosophic world, during that period, did not turn aside from the awful spectacle of miracles, but saw and believed; and that a few others should be found, who probably had never seen, and therefore would not believe, is surely no very extraordinary circumstance. Why should we not answer to objections, such as these, with the boldness of St. Jerôme; and bid Celsus, and Porphyry, and Julian, and their followers, learn the illustrious characters of the men, who founded, built up, and adorned the

Christian church? * Why should we not tell them, with Arnobius, of the orators, the grammarians, the rhetoricians, the lawyers, the physicians, the philosophers, “ who appeared conscious of the alterations in the moral and physical government of the world ;” and from that consciousness, forsook the ordinary occupations of life and study, and attached themselves to the Christian discipline ? †

I ANSWER, in the last place, that the miracles of Christians were falsely attributed to magic ; and were for that reason thought unworthy the notice of the writers you have referred to. Suetonius, in his life of Nero, calls the Christians men of a new and magical superstition : ‡ I am sensible, that you laugh at those “ sagacious commentators,” who translate the original word by magical ; and adopting the idea of Mosheim, you think it ought to be rendered

* Discant Celsus, Porphyrius, Julianus, rabidi adversus Christum canes, discant eorum sectatores, qui putant Ecclesiam nullos Philosophos et eloquentes, nullos habuisse Doctores ; quanti et quales viri eam fundaverint, extruxerint, ornaverintque ; et desinant fidem nostram rusticæ tantum simplicitatis arguere, suamque potius imperitiam agnoscant. Jero. Præ. Lib. de Illus. Eccl. Scrip.

† Arnob. Con. Gen. L. 11.

‡ Genus hominum, superstitionis novæ et maleficæ. Suet. in Nero. c. 25.

dered mischievous or pernicious : Unquestionably it frequently has that meaning ; with due deference, however, to Mosheim and yourself, I cannot help being of opinion, that in this place, as descriptive of the Christian religion, it is rightly translated magical. The Theodocian Code must be my excuse, for dissenting from such respectable authority ; and in it, I conjecture, you will find good reason for being of my opinion.* Nor ought any friend to Christianity to be astonished or alarmed at Suetonius applying the word magical to the Christian religion ; for the miracles wrought by Christ and his Apostles, principally consisted in alleviating the distresses, by curing the obstinate diseases of human kind ; and the proper meaning of magic, as understood by the ancients, is a higher and more holy branch of the art of healing.† The elder Pliny lost his life in an eruption of Vesuvius,

* Chaldæi ac Magi, et cæteri quos vulgus *maleficos* ob facinorum magnitudinem appellat.—Si quis *magus* vel magicis contaminibus adfuetus, qui *maleficus* vulgi consuetudine nuncupatur. 1x Cod. Theodo. Tit. xvi.

† Pliny, speaking of the origin of magic, says, *Natum primum e medicina nemo dubitat, ac specie salutari irrepisse velut altiore sanctioreque medicinam.*—He afterwards says, that it was mixed with mathematical arts ; and thus *magici* and *mathematici* are joined by Pliny, as *malefici* and *magici* are in the Theodocian Code. Plin. Nat. Hist. Lib. 30, c. 1.

Vesuvius, about forty-seven years after the death of Christ ; some fifteen years before the death of Pliny, the Christians were persecuted at Rome for a crime, of which every person knew them innocent ; but from the description which Tacitus gives, of the low estimation they were held in at that time (for which, however, he assigns no cause ; and therefore we may reasonably conjecture it was the same, for which the Jews were every where become so odious, an opposition to polytheism) and of the extreme sufferings they underwent, we cannot be much surprized, that their name is not to be found in the works of Pliny, or of Seneca ; the sect itself must, by Nero's persecution, have been almost destroyed in Rome ; and it would have been uncourtly, not to say unsafe, to have noticed an order of men, whose innocence an Emperor had determined to traduce, in order to divert the dangerous, but deserved stream of popular censure from himself. Notwithstanding this, there is a passage in the Natural History of Pliny, which, how much soever it may have been overlooked, contains, I think, a very strong allusion to the Christians ; and clearly intimates, he had heard of their miracles. In speaking concern-

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ing the origin of magic, he says,—there is also another faction of magic, derived from the Jews, Moses, and Lotopea, and subsisting at present.*—The word faction, does not ill denote the opinion the Romans entertained of the religious associations of the Christians;† and a magical faction implies their pretensions, at least, to the miraculous gifts of healing; and its descending from Moses, is according to the custom of the Romans, by which they confounded the Christians with the Jews; and its being then subsisting, seems to have a strong reference to the rumours Pliny had negligently heard reported of the Christians.

SUBMITTING each of these answers to your cool and candid consideration; I proceed to take notice of another difficulty in your fifteenth chapter, which some have thought one of the most important in your whole book—the silence of profane historians, concerning the

* Est et alia magicæ *factio*, a Mose *etiamnum* et Lotopea Judæis pendens. Plin. Nat. Hist. Lib. 30, c. 2. Edit. Hardu. Dr. Lardner and others have made slight mention of this passage, probably from their reading in bad editions *Jamne* for *etiamnum*, a Mose et Jamne et Jotape Judæis pendens.

† Tertullian reckons the sect of the Christians, *inter licitas factiones*. Ap. c. 38.

the preternatural darkness at the crucifixion of Christ.—You know, Sir, that several learned men are of opinion, that profane history is not silent upon this subject; I will, however, put their authority for the present quite out of the question. I will neither trouble you with the testimony of Phlegon, nor with the appeal of Tertullian to the public registers of the Romans; but meeting you upon your own ground, and granting you every thing you desire, I will endeavour, from a fair and candid examination of the history of this event, to suggest a doubt, at least, to your mind, whether this was “the greatest phænomenon, to which the mortal eye has been witness, since the creation of the globe.”

THIS darkness is mentioned by three of the four Evangelists; St. Matthew thus expresses himself,—*now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour*; St. Mark says,—*and when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour*; St. Luke,—*and it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour; and the sun was darkened*. The three Evangelists agree, that there was darkness;

darkness;—and they agree in the extent of the darkness: For it is the same expression in the original, which our translators have rendered *earth* in Luke, and *land* in the two other accounts; and they agree in the duration of the darkness; it lasted three hours:—Luke adds a particular circumstance, *that the sun was darkened*. I do not know, whether this event be any where else mentioned in scripture, so that our enquiry can neither be extensive nor difficult.

IN philosophical propriety of speech, darkness consists in the total absence of light, and admits of no degrees; however, in the more common acceptance of the word, there are degrees of darkness; as well as of light; and as the Evangelists have said nothing, by which the particular degree of darkness can be determined, we have as much reason to suppose it was slight, as you have that it was excessive; but if it was slight, though it had extended itself over the surface of the whole globe, the difficulty of its not being recorded by Pliny or Seneca vanishes at once.* Do you not perceive, Sir, upon what

* The Author of L'Evangile de la Raison is mistaken in saying, that the Evangelists speak of a *thick darkness*; and that

what a slender foundation this mighty objection is grounded; when we have only to put you upon proving, that the darkness at the crucifixion was of so unusual a nature, as to have excited the particular attention of all mankind, or even of those who were witnesses to it? But I do not mean to deal so logically with you; rather give me leave to spare you the trouble of your proof, by proving, or shewing the probability at least, of the direct contrary. There is a circumstance mentioned by St. John, which seems to indicate, that the darkness was not so excessive as is generally supposed; for it is probable, that during the continuance of the darkness, Jesus spoke both to his mother, and to his beloved disciple, whom he *saw* from the cross; they were near the cross; but the soldiers which surrounded it, must have kept them at too great a distance, for Jesus to have *seen* them and *known* them, had the darkness at the crucifixion been excessive, like the preternatural

that mistake has led him into another, into a disbelief of the event, because it has not been mentioned by the writers of the times—*sés historiens (the Evangelists) ont le front de nous dire, qu' a sa mort la terre a été couverte d' épaisses tenebres en plein midi et en pleine lune; comme si tous les écrivains de ce tems-la n' auroient pas remarqué un si étrange miracle! L'Evan. de la Raif. p. 99.*

natural darkness which God brought upon the land of Egypt; for it is expressly said, that during the continuance of that darkness, *they saw not one another*. The expression in St. Luke, *the sun was darkened*, tends rather to confirm, than to overthrow this reasoning. I am sensible, this expression is generally thought equivalent to another—the sun was eclipsed;—but the Bible is open to us all; and there can be no presumption, in endeavouring to investigate the meaning of scripture for ourselves. Luckily for the present argumentation, the very phrase of the sun's being darkened occurs, in so many words, in one other place, (and in only one) of the New Testament; and from that place, you may possibly see reason to imagine, that the darkness might not, perhaps, have been so intense, as to deserve the particular notice of the Roman naturalists:—*And he opened the bottomless pit, and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun was darkened,* and the air, by reason of the smoke of the pit.* If we should say, that the sun at the crucifixion was obnubilated,

* ——— *ἐξορισθῆναι ὁ ἥλιος.* *Αποκ. 9. 2.*

and darkened by the intervention of clouds, as it is here represented to be by the intervention of a smoke, like the smoke of a furnace, I do not see what you could object to our account; but such a phænomenon has surely no right to be esteemed the greatest that mortal eye has ever beheld. I may be mistaken in this interpretation; but I have no design to misrepresent the fact, in order to get rid of a difficulty; the darkness may have been as intense as many commentators have supposed it; but neither they nor you can prove it was so; and I am surely under no necessity, upon this occasion, of granting you, out of deference to any commentator, what you can neither prove nor render probable.

BUT you still, perhaps, may think, that the darkness, by its extent, made up for this deficiency in point of intenseness. The original word, expressive of its extent, is sometimes interpreted by the whole earth; more frequently in the New Testament, of any little portion of the earth; for we read of the land of Judah, of the land of Israel, of the land of Zabulon, and of the land Nephthalim; and it may very properly, I conceive, be translated in the place in question by Re-

gion,

gion. But why should all the world take notice of a darkness, which extended itself for a few miles about Jerufalem, and lasted but three hours? The Italians, especially, had no reason to remark the event as singular; since they were accustomed, at that time, as they are at present, to see the *neighbouring regions* so darkened for days together by the eruptions of *Ætna* and *Vesuvius*, that no man could know his neighbour*. We learn from the scripture account, that an earthquake accompanied this darkness; and a dark clouded sky, I apprehend, very frequently precedes an earthquake; but its extent is not great, nor is its intenseness excessive, nor is the phenomenon itself so unusual, as not commonly to pass unnoticed in ages of science and history. I fear, I may be liable to misrepresentation in this place; but I beg it may be observed, that however slight in degree, or however confined in extent, the darkness at the crucifixion may have been; I am of opinion, that the power of

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* —nos autem tenebras cogitemus tantas, quantæ quondam eruptione *Etnæ*orum ignium *finitimas regiones* obscuravisse dicuntur, ut per biduum nemo hominem homo agnosceret. Cic. de Nat. Deo. L. 2.—And Pliny, in describing the eruption of *Vesuvius*, which suffocated his uncle, says,—Dies alibi, illic nox omnibus noctibus nigrior densiorque.

God was as supernaturally exerted in its production, and in that of the earthquake which accompanied it, as in the opening of the graves, and the resurrection of the faints, which followed the resurrection of Christ.

IN another place, you seem not to believe “that Pontius Pilate informed the emperor of the unjust sentence of death, which he had pronounced against an innocent person :” And the same reason which made him silent as to the death, ought, one would suppose, to have made him silent as to the miraculous events, which accompanied it : And if Pilate, in his dispatches to the emperor, transmitted no account of the darkness (how great soever you suppose it to have been) which happened in a distant province ; I cannot apprehend, that the report of it could have ever gained such credit at Rome, as to induce either Pliny or Seneca to mention it as an authentic fact.

I am, &c.

LETTER



LETTER SIXTH.

SIR,

I MEAN not to detain you long with my remarks upon your sixteenth chapter; for in a short Apology for Christianity, it cannot be expected that I should apologize at length, for the indiscretions of the first Christians. Nor have I any disposition to reap a malicious pleasure, from exaggerating, what you have had so much goodnatured pleasure in extenuating, the truculent barbarity of their Roman persecutors.

M. DE VOLTAIRE has embraced every opportunity of contrasting the persecuting temper of the Christians with the mild tolerance of the ancient heathens; and I never read a page of his upon this subject, without thinking Christianity materially, if not intentionally, obliged to him, for his endeavour to depress the lofty spirit of religious bigotry. I may with justice pay the same compliment to you; and I do it with sin-

cerity ; heartily wishing, that in the prosecution of your work, you may render every species of intolerance universally detestable. There is no reason why you should abate the asperity of your invective ; since no one can suspect you of a design to traduce Christianity, under the guise of a zeal against persecution ; or if any one should be so simple, he need but open the Gospel to be convinced, that such a scheme is too palpably absurd, to have ever entered the head of any sensible and impartial man.

I WISH, for the credit of human nature, that I could find reason to agree with you, in what you have said of the “ universal toleration of Polytheism ; of the mild indifference of antiquity ; of the Roman Princes beholding, without concern, a thousand forms of religion subsisting in peace under their gentle sway.” But there are some passages in the Roman history, which make me hesitate at least in this point ; and almost induce me to believe, that the Romans were exceedingly jealous of all foreign religions, whether they were accompanied with immoral manners or not.

It was the Roman custom indeed, to invite the tutelary gods of the nations, which they intended
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to subdue, to abandon their charge; and to promise them the same, or even a more august worship, in the city of Rome; * and their triumphs were graced as much with the exhibition of their captive gods, as with the less humane one of their captive kings.† But this custom, though it filled the city with hundreds of gods of every country, denomination and quality, cannot be brought as a proof of Roman toleration; it may indicate the excess of their vanity, the extent of their superstition, or the refinement of their policy; but it can never shew, that the religion of individuals, when it differed from public wisdom, was either connived at as a matter of indifference, or tolerated as an inalienable right of human nature.

UPON another occasion, you, Sir, have referred to Livy, as relating the introduction and suppression of the rites of Bacchus; and in that very place we find him confessing, that the prohibiting all foreign religions, and the abol-

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ishing

* In oppugnationibus, ante omnia solitum a Romanis Sacerdotibus evocari Deum, cujus in tutela id oppidum esset; promittique illi eundem, aut ampliorem apud Romanos cultum. Plin. Nat. Hist. L. 38, C. iv.

† Roma triumphantis quotiens Ducis inclita currum
Plausibus excepit, totiens altaria Divum

Addidit spoliis sibi nova numina fecit. Pruden,

ishing every mode of sacrifice which differed from the Roman mode, was a business frequently entrusted by their ancestors to the care of the proper magistrates; and he gives this reason for the procedure, That nothing could contribute more effectually to the ruin of religion, than the sacrificing after an external rite, and not after the manner instituted by their fathers.*

Not thirty years before this event, the Prætor, in conformity to a decree of the Senate, had issued an edict—that no one should presume to sacrifice in any public place after a new or foreign manner.† And in a still more early period, the Ædiles had been commanded to take care, that no gods were worshipped, except the Roman gods; and that the Roman gods

were

* Quoties hoc patrum avorumque ætate negotium est magistratibus datum, ut sacra externa fieri vetarent? sacrificulos vatesque foro, circo, urbe prohiberent? *vaticinos libros conquirerent comburerentque?* omnem disciplinam sacrificandi, præterquam more Romano, abolerent? Judicabant enim prudentissimi viri omnis divini humanique juris, nihil æque dissolvendæ religionis esse, quam ubi non patrio, sed externo ritu sacrificaretur. Liv. L. xxxix. C. xvi.

† Ut quicumque *libros vaticinos precationesque*, aut artem sacrificandi conscriptam haberet, eos libros omnes literasque ad se ante Kalendas Apriles deferret: neu quis in publico sacrove loco, novo aut externo ritu sacrificaret. Liv. L. xxv. C. 3.

were worshipped after no manner, but the established manner of the country. *

BUT to come nearer to the times of which you are writing. In Dion Cassius you may meet with a great courtier, one of the interior cabinet, and a polished statesman, in a set speech, upon the most momentous subject, expressing himself to the Emperor, in a manner agreeable enough to the practice of antiquity, but utterly inconsistent with the most remote idea of religious toleration. The speech alluded to contains, I confess it, nothing more than the advice of an individual; but it ought to be remembered, that *that* individual was Mæcenas, that the advice was given to Augustus, and that the occasion of giving it was no less important than the settling the form of the Roman government. He recommends it to Cæsar, to worship the gods himself, according to the established form; and to *force* all others to do the same; and to *hate* and to *punish* all those who should attempt to introduce foreign

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religions;

* Datum inde negotium Ædilibus, ut animadverterent, ne qui, nisi Romani Dii neu quo alio more, quam patrio colerentur. Liv. L. iv. C. 30.

religions:† Nay, he bids him, in the same place, have an eye upon the philosophers also; so that free thinking, free speaking, at least, upon religious matters, was not quite so safe under the gentle sway of the Roman princes, as, thank God, it is under the much more gentle government of our own.

IN the Edict of Toleration published by Galerius, after six years unremitted persecution of the Christians, we perceive his motive for persecution to have been the same with that which had influenced the conduct of the more ancient Romans, an abhorrence of all innovations in religion. You have favoured us with the translation of this edict, in which he says—"we were particularly desirous of reclaiming into the way of reason and nature," *ad bonas mentes* (a good pretence this for a Polytheistic persecutor) "the deluded Christians, who had renounced the religion and ceremonies instituted by their fathers"—this is the precise language of Livy, describing a persecution of a foreign religion three hundred years before, *turba erat nec sacrificantium*

† Ταυτα τε ετο πραττε, και προσειτι το μεν θειον παντε παντως αυτος τε σεβου, κατα τα πατρια, και τους αλλους τιμην αναγκαζε· τους δε δη ξενιζοντας τι πρεσι αυτο και μισει και κολαζε. Dion Cas. L. 52.

curtium nec precantium Deos patrio more.— And the very expedient of forcing the Christians to deliver up their religious books, which was practised in this persecution, and which Mosheim attributes to the advice of Hierocles, and you to that of the philosophers of those times, seems clear to me, from the places in Livy before quoted, to have been nothing but an old piece of state policy, to which the Romans had recourse, as often as they apprehended their established religion to be in any danger.

IN the preamble of the letter of toleration, which the emperor Maximin reluctantly wrote to Sabinus about a year after the publication of Galerius' Edict, there is a plain avowal of the reasons, which induced Galerius and Diocletian to commence their persecution; they had seen the temples of the gods forsaken, and were determined by the severity of punishment to reclaim men to their worship.*

IN

* Συνείδον σχεδόν πάντας ανθρώπους, καὶ ἀλειψθείσης τῆς τῶν θεῶν θρησκείας, τῷ ἐδίει τῶν χριστιανῶν αὐτὲς συμμεμιχότας. Οὕτως διατεταχέναι πάντας ἀνθρώπους τῆς ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν τῶν ἀθανάτων ἀναχωρησάντας, πρὸ δηλῶ κολάσει καὶ τιμωρίᾳ εἰς τὴν θρησκείαν τῶν θεῶν ἀνακληθῆναι. Euseb. Lib. ix. C. 4.

IN short, the system recommended by Mæcenæ, of forcing every person to be of the emperor's religion, and of hating and punishing every innovator, contained no new doctrine ; it was correspondent to the practice of the Roman senate, in the most illustrious times of the republic ; and seems to have been generally adopted by the emperors, in their treatment of Christians, whilst they themselves were Pagans ; and in their treatment of Pagans, after they themselves became Christians ; and if any one should be willing to derive those laws against Heretics (which are so abhorrent from the mild spirit of the gospel, and so reproachful to the Roman Code) from the blind adherence of the Christian emperors to the intolerant policy of their Pagan predecessors, something, I think, might be produced in support of his conjecture.

BUT I am sorry to have said so much upon such a subject.—In endeavouring to palliate the severity of the Romans towards the Christians, you have remarked, “ it was in vain, that the oppressed believer asserted the inalienable rights of conscience, and private judgment.” “ Though his situation might excite the pity, his arguments could never reach the

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the understanding either of the philosophic, or of the believing part of the Pagan world."

How is this, Sir? are the arguments for liberty of conscience so exceedingly inconclusive, that you think them incapable of reaching the understanding, even of philosophers? A captious adversary would embrace with avidity the opportunity this passage affords him, of blotting your character with the odious stain of being a persecutor; a stain, which no learning can wipe out, which no genius or ability can render amiable. I am far from entertaining such an opinion of your principles; but this conclusion seems fairly deducible from what you have said,—that the minds of the Pagans were so pre-occupied with the notions of forcing, and hating, and punishing those, who differed from them in religion, that arguments for the inalienable rights of conscience, which would have convinced yourself and every philosopher in Europe, and staggered the resolution of an inquisitor, were incapable of reaching their understandings, or making any impression on their hearts; and you might, perhaps, have spared yourself some perplexity, in the investigation

investigation of the motives, which induced the Roman emperors to persecute, and the Roman people to hate the Christians, if you had not overlooked the true one, and adopted with too great facility the erroneous idea of the extreme tolerance of Pagan Rome.

THE Christians, you observe, were accused of atheism:—And it must be owned, that they were the greatest of all atheists, in the opinion of the polytheists; for, instead of Hesiod's thirty thousand gods, they could not be brought to acknowledge above one; and even that one they refused, at the hazard of their lives, to blaspheme with the appellation of Jupiter. But is it not somewhat singular, that the pretensions of the Christians to a constant intercourse with superior beings, in the working of miracles, should have been a principal cause of converting to their faith, those who branded them with the imputation of atheism?

THEY were accused too of forming dangerous conspiracies against the state:—This accusation, you own, was as unjust as the preceding; but there seems to have been a peculiar hardship in the situation of the Christians;

tians ; since the very same men, who thought them dangerous to the state, on account of their conspiracies ; condemned them, as you have observed, for not interfering in its concerns ; for their criminal disregard to the business of war and government ; and for their entertaining doctrines, which were supposed “ to prohibit them from assuming the character of soldiers, of magistrates, and of princes :” Men, such as these, would have made but poor conspirators.

THEY were accused, lastly, of the most horrid crimes :—This accusation, it is confessed, was mere calumny ; yet, as calumny is generally more extensive in its influence than truth, perhaps this calumny might be more powerful in stopping the progress of Christianity, than the virtues of the Christians were in promoting it : And, in truth, Origen observes, that the Christians, on account of the crimes which were maliciously laid to their charge, were held in such abhorrence, that no one would so much as speak to them. It may be worth while to remark from him, that the Jews, in the very beginning of Christianity, were the authors of all those calumnies,

nies, which Celsus afterwards took such great delight in urging against the Christians, and which you have mentioned with such great precision.*

It is no improbable supposition, that the clandestine manner, in which the persecuting spirit of the Jews and Gentiles obliged the Christians to celebrate their Eucharist, together with the expressions of eating the body, and drinking the blood of Christ, which were used in its institution, and the custom of imparting a kiss of charity to each other, and of calling each other by the appellations of brother and sister,† gave occasions to their enemies to invent, and induced careless observers to believe, all the odious things which were said against the Christians.

You

* Videtur mihi fecisse idem Celsus, quod Judæi, qui sub Christianismi initium errorem sparsere, quasi ejus sectæ homines mactati pueri vescerentur carnibus; et quod, quoties eis libeat operam dare occultis libidinibus, extincto lumine constupret, quam quisque nactus fuerit. Quæ falsa et iniqua opinio dudum valde multos a religione nostra alienos tenuit; persuasos, quod tales sint Christiani; et ad hoc temporis nonnullos fallit: quia ea de causa Christianos averfantur, ut nec simplex colloquium cum eis habere velint. Orig. con. Cel. Lib. vi.

† The Romans used these expressions in so impure a sense, that Martial calls them, Nomina nequiora. Lib. II. Epig. iv.

You have displayed at length, in expressive diction, the accusations of the enemies of Christianity; and you have told us of the imprudent defence, by which the Christians vindicated the purity of their morals; and you have huddled up in a short note (which many a reader will never see) the testimony of Pliny to their innocence; permit me to do the Christians a little justice, by producing in their cause the whole truth.

BETWEEN seventy and eighty years after the death of Christ, Pliny had occasion to consult the emperor Trajan, concerning the manner in which he should treat the Christians; it seems as if there had been judicial proceedings against them, though Pliny had never happened to attend any of them. He knew, indeed, that men were to be punished for being Christians, or he would not, as a sensible magistrate, have received the accusations of legal, much less of illegal anonymous informers against them; nor would he, before he wrote to the emperor, have put to death those, whom his threats could not hinder from persevering in their confession, that they were Christians. His harsh manner
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of proceeding "in an office the most repugnant to his humanity," had made many apostatize from their profession; persons of this complexion, were well fitted to inform him of every thing they knew concerning the Christians; accordingly he examined them; but not one of them accused the Christians of any other crime, than of praying to Christ, as to some God, and of binding themselves by an oath, not to be guilty of any wickedness. Not contented with this information, he put two maid servants, which were called ministers, to the torture; but even the rack could not extort from the imbecility of the sex a confession of any crime, any account different from that which the apostates had voluntarily given; not a word do we find of their feasting upon murdered infants, or of their mixing in incestuous commerce. After all his pains, Pliny pronounced the meal of the Christians to be *promiscuous* and *innocent*: Persons of both sexes, of all ages, and of every condition, assembled promiscuously together: There was nothing for chastity to blush at, or for humanity to shudder at, in these meetings; there was no se-

cret.

cret initiation of profelytes by abhorred rites ; but they eat a promiscuous meal in Christian charity, and with the most perfect innocence.*

WHATEVER faults, then, the Christians may have been guilty of in after times ; though you could produce to us a thousand ambitious prelates of Carthage, or sensual ones of Antioch, and blot ten thousand pages with the impurities of the Christian clergy ; yet at this period, whilst the memory of Christ and his Apostles was fresh in their minds ; or, in the more emphatic language of Jerome, “ whilst the blood of our Lord was warm, and recent faith was fervent in the believers ;” we have the greatest reason to conclude, that they were eminently distinguished for the probity and the purity of their lives. Had there been but a shadow of a crime in their assemblies,

* — affirmabant autem, hanc fuisse summam vel culpæ suæ, vel erroris, quod essent soliti statò die ante lucem convenire : carmenque Christo, quasi Deo, dicere secum invicem : seque sacramento non *in sæculum* aliquod obstringere, sed ne furta, ne latrocinia, ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depositum appellati abnegarent : quibus peractis, morem sibi discedendi fuisse, rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum, *promiscuum* tantum, et *innocuum*. Plin. Epist. xcvi. Lib. x.

it must have been detected by the industrious search of the intelligent Pliny ; and it is a matter of real surprize, that no one of the apostates thought of paying court to the governor, by a false testimony ; especially, as the apostacy seems to have been exceeding general ; since the temples, which had been almost deserted, began again to be frequented ; and the victims, for which a little time before scarce a purchaser was to be found, began again every where to be bought up. This, Sir, is a valuable testimony in our favour ; it is not that of a declaiming apologist, of a deluding priest, or of a deluded martyr, of an orthodox bishop, or of any “ of the most pious of men,” the Christians ; but it is that of a Roman magistrate, philosopher, and lawyer ; who cannot be supposed to have wanted inclination to detect the immoralities, or the conspiracies of the Christians ; since, in his treatment of them, he had stretched the authority of his office, and violated alike the laws of his country, and of humanity.

With this testimony, I will conclude my remarks ; for I have no disposition to black-

en the character you have given of Nero; or to lessen the humanity of the Roman magistrates; or to magnify the number of Christians; or of martyrs; or to undertake the defence of a few fanatics, who by their injudicious zeal brought ruin upon themselves, and disgrace upon their profession. I may not probably have convinced you, that you are wrong in any thing, which you have advanced; or that the authors you have quoted, will not support you in the inferences you have drawn from their works; or that Christianity ought to be distinguished from its corruptions; yet I may, perhaps, have had the good fortune to lessen, in the minds of others, some of that dislike to the Christian religion, which the perusal of your book had unhappily excited. I have touched but upon general topics; for I should have wearied out your patience, to say nothing of my readers, or my own, had I enlarged upon every thing in which I dissent from you; and a minute examination of your work would, moreover, have had the appearance of a captious disposition to descend into illiberal personalities; and might have produced a cer-

tain acrimony of sentiment or expression, which may be serviceable in supplying the place of argument, or adding a zest to a dull composition; but has nothing to do with the investigation of truth. Sorry shall I be, if what I have written, should give the least interruption to the prosecution of the great work, in which you are engaged; the world is now possessed of the opinion of us both, upon the subject in question; and it may, perhaps, be proper for us both to leave it in this state; I say not this, from any backwardness to acknowledge my mistakes, when I am convinced that I am in an error; but to express the almost insuperable reluctance, which I feel to the bandying abusive argument, in public controversy: It is not, in good truth, a difficult task, to chastise the froward petulance of those, who mistake personal invective for reasoning, and clumsy banter for ingenuity; but it is a dirty business at best, and should never be undertaken by a man of any temper, except when the interests of truth may suffer by his neglect. Nothing of this nature, I am sensible, is to be expected from you; and if any thing of the kind has happened

happened to escape myself, I hereby disclaim the intention of saying it, and heartily wish it unsaid.

WILL you permit me, Sir, through this channel (I may not, perhaps, have another so good opportunity of doing it) to address a few words? not to yourself, but to a set of men, who disturb all serious company with their profane declamation against Christianity; and who having picked up in their travels, or the writings of the deists, a few flimsy objections, infect with their ignorant and irreverent ridicule the ingenuous minds of the rising generation.

GENTLEMEN,

SUPPOSE the mighty work accomplished, the cross trampled upon, Christianity every where proscribed, and the religion of Nature once more become the religion of Europe; what advantage will you have derived to your country, or to yourselves, from the exchange? I know your answer—you will have freed the world from the hypocrisy of Priests, and the tyranny of Superstition.—No; you forget that Lycurgus, and Numa, and Odin, and Mango-Copac, and all the great legislators of ancient and modern story, have been of opinion, that the affairs of civil society could not well be conducted without *some* religion; you must of necessity introduce a priesthood, with, probably, as much hypocrisy; a religion, with, assuredly, more superstition, than that which you now reprobate with such indecent and ill-grounded contempt. But I will tell you from what you will have freed the world; you will have freed it from its abhorrence of vice, and from every powerful

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erful incentive to virtue ; you will, with the religion, have brought back the depraved morality of Paganism ; you will have robbed mankind of their firm assurance of another life ; and thereby you will have despoiled them of their patience, of their humility, of their charity, of their chastity, of all those mild and silent virtues, which (however despicable they may appear in your eyes) are the only ones which meliorate and sublime our nature ; which Paganism never knew, which spring from Christianity alone, which do or might constitute our comfort in this life, and without the possession of which, another life, if after all there should happen to be one, must (unless a miracle be exerted in the alteration of our disposition) be more vicious and more miserable than this is.

PERHAPS you will contend, that the universal right of reason, that the truth and fitness of things, are of themselves sufficient to exalt the nature, and regulate the manners of mankind. Shall we never have done with this groundless commendation of natural law ? Look into the first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and you will see the extent of its influence over the Gentiles of those days ; or if you dislike

Paul's authority, and the manners of antiquity, look into the more admired accounts of modern Voyagers ; and examine its influence over the Pagans of our own times, over the sensual inhabitants of Otahitè, over the Cannibals of New Zealand, or the remorseless Savages of America. But these men are Barbarians.—Your law of nature, notwithstanding, extends even to them :—But they have misused their reason ;—they have then the more need of, and would be the more thankful for that revelation, which you, with an ignorant and fastidious self-sufficiency, deem useless.—But, they might of themselves, if they thought fit, become wise and virtuous.—I answer with Cicero, *ut nihil interest, utrum nemo valeat, an nemo valere possit ; sic non intelligo quid intersit, utrum nemo sit sapiens, an nemo esse possit.*

THESE however, you will think, are extraordinary instances ; and that we ought not from these, to take our measure of the excellency of the law of nature ; but rather from the civilized states of China and Japan, or from the nations which flourished in learning and in arts, before Christianity was heard of in the world. You mean to say, that by the law of nature, which you are
desirous

desirous of substituting in the room of the gospel, you do not understand those rules of conduct, which an individual, abstracted from the community, and deprived of the institution of mankind, could excogitate for himself; but such a system of precepts, as the most enlightened men of the most enlightened ages have recommended to our observance. Where do you find this system? We cannot meet with it in the works of Stobæus, or the Scythian Anacharsis, nor in those of Plato or Cicero, nor in those of the Emperor Antoninus, or the slave Epictetus; for we are persuaded, that the most animated considerations of the *ωρετόν*, and the *honestum*, of the beauty of virtue, and the fitness of things, are not able to furnish, even a Brutus himself, with permanent principles of action; much less are they able to purify the polluted recesses of a vitiated heart, to curb the irregularity of appetite, or restrain the impetuosity of passion in common men. If you order us to examine the works of Grotius, or Puffendorf, of Burlamaqui, or Hutchinson, for what you understand by the law of nature; we apprehend that you are in a great error, in taking your notions of natural law, as discoverable by natural reason,

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from the elegant systems of it, which have been drawn up by Christian Philosophers; since they have all laid their foundations, either tacitly or expressly, upon a principle derived from revelation, a thorough knowledge of the Being and attributes of God; and even those amongst yourselves, who rejecting Christianity still continue Theists, are indebted to revelation (whether you are either aware of, or disposed to acknowledge the debt, or not) for those sublime speculations concerning the Deity, which you have fondly attributed to the excellency of your own unassisted reason. If you would know the real genius of natural law, and how far it can proceed in the investigation or enforcement of moral duties; you must consult the manners and the writings of those, who have never heard of either the Jewish or the Christian dispensation, or of those other manifestations of himself, which God vouchsafed to Adam and to the Patriarchs, before and after the flood. It would be difficult perhaps any where, to find a people entirely destitute of traditionary notices concerning a Deity, and of traditionary fears or expectations of another life; and the morals of mankind may have, perhaps, been no where quite so abandoned

abandoned as they would have been, had they been left wholly to themselves in these points : However, it is a truth, which cannot be denied, how much soever it may be lamented, that though the generality of mankind have always had some faint conceptions of God, and his providence ; yet they have been always greatly inefficacious in the production of good morality, and highly derogatory to his nature, amongst all the people of the earth, except the Jews and Christians ; and some may perhaps be desirous of excepting the Mahometans, who derive all that is good in their *Koran* from Christianity.

THE laws concerning justice, and the reparation of damages, concerning the security of property, and the performance of contracts ; concerning, in short, whatever affects the well-being of civil society, have been every where understood with sufficient precision ; and if you choose to stile Justinian's code, a code of natural law, though you will err against propriety of speech, yet you are so far in the right, that natural reason discovered, and the depravity of human nature compelled human kind, to establish by proper sanctions the laws therein contained ;

contained ; and you will have moreover Carneades, no mean Philosopher, on your side ; who knew of no law of nature, different from that which men had instituted for their common utility ; and which was various according to the manners of men in different climates, and changeable with a change of times in the same. And, in truth, in all countries where Paganism has been the established religion, though a philosopher may now and then have stepped beyond the paltry prescript of civil jurisprudence, in his pursuit of virtue ; yet the bulk of mankind have ever been contented with that scanty pittance of morality, which enabled them to escape the lash of civil punishment : I call it a scanty pittance ; because a man may be intemperate, iniquitous, impious, a thousand ways a profligate and a villain, and yet elude the cognizance, and avoid the punishment of civil laws.

I AM sensible, you will be ready to say, what is all this to the purpose ? though the bulk of mankind may never be able to investigate the laws of natural religion, nor disposed to reverence their sanctions when investigated by others, nor solicitous about any other standard of moral rectitude, than civil legislation ; yet the inconveniences

veniences which may attend the extirpation of
 Christianity, can be no proof of its truth :—I
 have not produced them, as a proof of its truth;
 but they are a strong and conclusive proof, if
 not of its truth, at least of its utility ; and the
 consideration of its utility, may be a motive to
 yourselves for examining, whether it may not
 chance to be true ; and it ought to be a reason
 with every good citizen, and with every man of
 sound judgment, to keep his opinions to him-
 self, if from any particular circumstances in his
 studies, or in his education, he should have the
 misfortune to think that it is not true. If you
 can discover to the rising generation a better
 religion than the Christian, one that will more
 effectually animate their hopes, and subdue
 their passions, make them better men or better
 members of society, we importune you to pub-
 lish it for their advantage ; but till you can do
 that, we beg of you not to give the reins to their
 passions, by instilling into their unsuspicious
 minds your pernicious prejudices : Even now,
 men scruple not, by their lawless lust, to ruin
 the repose of private families, and to fix a stain
 of infamy upon the noblest : Even now, they
 hesitate not, in lifting up a murderous arm
 against

against the life of their friend, or against their own, as often as the fever of intemperance stimulates their resentment ; or the satiety of an useless life excites their despondency : Even now, whilst we are persuaded of a resurrection from the dead, and of a *judgment to come*, we find it difficult enough to resist the solicitations of sense, and to escape unspotted from the licentious manners of the world : But what will become of our virtue, what of the consequent peace and happiness of society, if you persuade us, that there are no such things ? in two words,—you may ruin yourselves by your attempt, and you will certainly ruin your country by your success.

BUT the consideration of the inutility of your design, is not the only one, which should induce you to abandon it ; the argument *a tuto* ought to be warily managed, or it may tend to the silencing our opposition to any system of superstition which has had the good fortune to be sanctified by public authority ; it is, indeed, liable to no objection in the present case ; we do not, however, wholly rely upon its cogency. It is not contended, that Christianity is to be received, merely because it is useful ; but because

cause

cause it is true. This you deny, and think your objections well grounded; we conceive them originating in your vanity, your immorality, or your misapprehension. There are many worthless doctrines, many superstitious observances, which the fraud or folly of mankind have every where annexed to Christianity (especially in the church of Rome) as essential parts of it; if you take these sorry appendages to Christianity, for Christianity itself, as preached by Christ, and by the Apostles; if you confound the Roman with the Christian religion, you quite misapprehend its nature; and are in a state similar to that of men, mentioned by Plutarch, in his treatise of superstition; who flying from superstition, leapt over religion, and sunk into downright Atheism.*—Christianity is not a religion very palatable to a voluptuous age;

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* Le Papisme, says Helvetius in a Posthumous Work, n'est aux yeux d'un homme sensé qu'une pure idolatrie—nous sommes étonnés de l'absurdité de la religion païenne. Cella de la religion Papiste étonnera bien d'avantage un jour la postérité.—We trust, that day is not at a great distance, and deism will then be buried in the ruins of the church of Rome; for the taking the superstition, the avarice, the ambition, the intolerance of Antichristianism for Christianity, has been the great error, upon which infidelity has built its system both at home and abroad.

it will not conform its precepts to the standard of fashion ; it will not lessen the deformity of vice by lenient appellations ; but calls keeping, whoredom ; intrigue, adultery ; and duelling, murder ; it will not pander the lust, it will not licence the intemperance of mankind ; it is a troublesome monitor to a man of pleasure ; and your way of life may have made you quarrel with your religion.—As to your vanity, as a cause of your infidelity, suffer me to produce the sentiments of M. Bayle upon that head ; if the description does not suit your character, you will not be offended at it ; and if you are offended with its freedom, it will do you good.

“ This inclines me to believe, that Libertines, like Des-Barreaux, are not greatly persuaded of the truth of what they say. They have made no deep examination ; they have learned some few objections, which they are perpetually making a noise with ; they speak from a principle of ostentation, and give themselves the lie in the time of danger.—Vanity has a greater share in their disputes, than conscience ; they imagine, that the singularity and boldness of the opinions which they maintain, will give them the reputation of men of parts :—By degrees, they get a
habit

habit of holding impious discourses ; and if their vanity be accompanied by a voluptuous life, their progress in that road is the swifter.” *

THE main stress of your objections rests not upon the insufficiency of the external evidence to the truth of Christianity ; for few of you, though you may become the future ornaments of the senate, or of the bar, have ever employed an hour in its examination ; but upon the difficulty of the doctrines, contained in the New Testament : They exceed, you say, your comprehension ; and you felicitate yourselves, that you are not yet arrived at the true standard of orthodox faith,—*credo quia impossibile*. You think it would be taking a superfluous trouble, to enquire into the nature of the external proofs by which Christianity is established ; since, in your opinion, the book itself carries with it its own refutation. A gentleman as acute, probably, as any of you ; and who once believed, perhaps as little as any of you, has drawn a quite different conclusion from the perusal of the New Testament ; his book (however exceptionable it may be thought in some particular parts) exhib-

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* Bayle, Hist. Dict. Art. Des-Barreaux.

its not only a distinguished triumph of reason over prejudice, of Christianity over Deism; but it exhibits, what is infinitely more rare, the character of a man, who has had courage and candour enough to acknowledge it.*

BUT what if there should be some incomprehensible doctrines in the Christian religion; some circumstances, which in their causes, or their consequences, surpass the reach of human reason; are they to be rejected upon that account? You are, or would be thought, men of reading, and knowledge, and enlarged understandings; weigh the matter fairly; and consider whether revealed religion be not, in this respect, just upon the same footing, with every other object of your contemplation. Even in mathematics, the science of demonstration itself, though you get over its first principles, and learn to digest the idea of a point without parts, a line without breadth, and a surface without thickness; yet you will find yourselves at a loss to comprehend the perpetual approximation of lines, which can never meet; the doctrine of incommensurables, and of an infinity of infinites, each

* See A View of the Internal Evidence, &c. by Soame Jenyns.

each infinitely greater, or infinitely less, not only than any finite quantity, but than each other. In physics, you cannot comprehend the primary cause of any thing ; not of the light, by which you see ; nor of the elasticity of the air, by which you hear ; nor of the fire, by which you are warmed. In physiology, you cannot tell, what first gave motion to the heart ; nor what continues it ; nor why its motion is less voluntary, than that of the lungs ; nor why you are able to move your arm, to the right or left, by a simple volition : You cannot explain the cause of animal heat ; nor comprehend the principle, by which your body was at first formed, nor by which it is sustained, nor by which it will be reduced to earth. In natural religion, you cannot comprehend the eternity or omnipresence of the Deity ; nor easily understand, how his prescience can be consistent with your freedom, or his immutability with his government of moral agents ; nor why he did not make all his creatures equally perfect ; nor why he did not create them sooner : In short, you cannot look into any branch of knowledge, but you will meet with subjects above your comprehension. The fall and the redemption of human kind, are not more incomprehensible, than the creation

and the conservation of the universe ; the infinite Author of the works of providence, and of nature, is equally inscrutable, equally past our finding out in them both. And it is somewhat remarkable, that the deepest enquirers into nature, have ever thought with most reverence, and spoken with most diffidence, concerning those things, which in revealed religion may seem hard to be understood ; they have ever avoided that self-sufficiency of knowledge, which springs from ignorance, produces indifference, and ends in infidelity. Admirable to this purpose, is the reflection of the greatest mathematician of the present age, when he is combating an opinion of Newton's, by an hypothesis of his own, still less defensible than that which he opposes :—*Tous les jours que je vois de ces esprits-forts, qui critique les vérités de notre religion, et s'en moquent même avec la plus impertinente suffisance, je pense, chetifs mortels ! combien et combien des choses sur lesquels vous raisonnez si légèrement, sont elles plus sublimes, et plus élevés, que celles sur lesquelles le grand Newton s'égare si grossièrement.**

PLATO

* Euler.

PLATO mentions a set of men, who were very ignorant, and thought themselves supremely wise; and who rejected the argument for the being of a God, derived from the harmony and order of the universe, as old and trite; † there have been men, it seems, in all ages, who in affecting singularity, have overlooked truth: An argument, however, is not the worse for being old; and surely it would have been a more just mode of reasoning, if you had examined the external evidence for the truth of Christianity, weighed the old arguments from miracles, and from prophecies, before you had rejected the whole account from the difficulties you met with in it. You would laugh at an Indian, who in peeping into a history of England, and meeting with the mention of the Thames being frozen, or of a shower of hail, or of snow, should throw the book aside, as unworthy of his further notice, from his want of ability to comprehend these phænomena.

IN considering the argument from miracles, you will soon be convinced, that it is possible for God to work miracles; and you will be convinced, that it is as possible for human testi-

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† De Leg. Lib. x.

mony to establish the truth of miraculous, as of physical or historical events ; but before you can be convinced, that the miracles in question are supported by such testimony as deserves to be credited, you must enquire at what period, and by what persons, the books of the old and new Testament were composed ; if you reject the account, without making this examination, you reject it from prejudice, not from reason.

THERE is, however, a short method of examining this argument, which may, perhaps, make as great an impression on your minds, as any other. Three men of distinguished abilities rose up at different times, and attacked Christianity with every objection which their malice could suggest, or their learning could devise ; but neither Celsus in the second century, nor Porphyry in the third, nor the emperor Julian himself in the fourth century, ever questioned the reality of the miracles related in the Gospels. Do but you grant us, what these men (who were more likely to know the truth of the matter, than you can be) granted to their adversaries, and we will very readily let you make the most of the Magic, to which, as the last wretched shift, they were forced to attribute them. We
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can find you men, in our days, who from the mixture of two colourless liquors, will produce you a third as red as blood, or of any other colour you desire ; *et dicto citius*, by a drop resembling water, will restore the transparency ; they will make two fluids coalesce into a solid body ; and from the mixture of liquors colder than ice, will instantly raise you a horrid explosion and a tremendous flame : These, and twenty other tricks, they will perform, without having been sent with our Saviour to Egypt to learn magic ; nay, with a bottle or two of oil, they will compose the undulations of a lake ; and by a little art, they will restore the functions of life to a man, who has been an hour or two under water, or a day or two buried in the snow : But in vain will these men, or the greatest Magician that Egypt ever saw, say to a boisterous sea, *Peace, be still* ; in vain will they say to a carcase rotting in the grave, *Come forth* ; the winds and the sea will not obey them, and the putrid carcase will not hear them. You need not suffer yourselves to be deprived of the weight of this argument, from its having been observed, that the Fathers have acknowledged the supernatural part of Paganism ; since the Fathers were in no condition

to detect a cheat, which was supported both by the disposition of the people, and the power of the civil magistrate; * and they were from that inability, forced to attribute to infernal agency, what was too cunningly contrived to be detected, and contrived for too impious a purpose, to be credited as the work of God.

WITH respect to prophecy, you may, perhaps, have accustomed yourselves to consider it, as originating in Asiatic enthusiasm, in Chaldean mystery, or in the subtle stratagem of interested priests; and have given yourselves no more trouble concerning the predictions of sacred, than concerning the oracles of Pagan history. Or if you have ever cast a glance upon this subject, the dissensions of learned men concerning the proper interpretation of the Revelation, and other difficult prophecies, may have made you rashly conclude, that all prophecies were equally unintelligible; and more indebted for their accomplishment, to a fortunate concurrence of events, and the pliant ingenuity of the expositor, than to the inspired foresight of the prophet.

* See *Id. Lyttlet. Obs.* on St. Paul, p. 59.

prophet. In all that the prophets of the Old Testament have delivered, concerning the destruction of particular cities, and the desolation of particular kingdoms, you may see nothing but shrewd conjectures, which any one acquainted with the history of the rise and fall of empires, might certainly have made: And as you would not hold him for a prophet, who should now affirm, that London or Paris would afford to future ages, a spectacle just as melancholy as that which we now contemplate with a sigh, in the ruins of Agrigentum or Palmyra; so you cannot persuade yourselves to believe, that the denunciations of the prophets against the haughty cities of Tyre or Babylon, for instance, proceeded from the inspiration of the Deity. There is no doubt, that by some such general kind of reasoning, many are influenced to pay no attention to an argument, which, if properly considered, carries with it the strongest conviction.

SPINOZA said, That he would have broken his atheistic system to pieces, and embraced without repugnance the ordinary faith of Christians, if he could have persuaded himself

self of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead; and I question not, that there are many disbelievers, who would relinquish their Deistic tenets, and receive the gospel, if they could persuade themselves, that God had ever so far interfered in the moral government of the world, as to illumine the mind of any one man with the knowledge of future events. A miracle strikes the senses of the persons who see it, a prophecy addresses itself to the understandings of those who behold its completion; and it requires in many cases some learning, in all some attention, to judge of the correspondence of events with the predictions concerning them. No one can be convinced, that what Jeremiah and the other prophets foretold of the fate of Babylon, that it should be besieged by the Medes; that it should be taken, when her mighty men were drunken, when her springs were dried up; and that it should become a pool of water, and should remain desolate forever; no one, I say, can be convinced, that all these, and other parts of the prophetic denunciation, have been minutely fulfilled, without spending some time in reading the accounts

accounts which profane historians have delivered down to us concerning its being taken by Cyrus; and which modern travellers have given us of its present situation.

PORPHYRY was so persuaded of the coincidence between the prophecies of Daniel and the events, that he was forced to affirm, the prophecies were written, after the things prophesied of had happened; another Porphyry has, in our days, been so astonished at the correspondence between the prophecy concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, as related by St. Matthew, and the history of that event, as recorded by Josephus; that rather than embrace Christianity, he has ventured (contrary to the faith of all ecclesiastical history, the opinion of the learned of all ages, and all the rules of good criticism) to assert, that St. Matthew wrote his gospel after Jerusalem had been taken and destroyed by the Romans. You may from these instances perceive the strength of the argument from prophecy; it has not been able indeed to vanquish the prejudices of either the ancient or the modern Porphyry; but it has been able to compel them both, to be guilty of obvious falsehoods,

falsehoods, which have nothing but impudent assertions to support them.

SOME over-zealous interpreters of scripture have found prophecies in simple narrations, extended real predictions beyond the times and circumstances to which they naturally were applied, and perplexed their readers with a thousand quaint allusions and allegorical conceits; this proceeding has made men of sense pay less regard to prophecy in general; there are some predictions, however, such as those concerning the present state of the Jewish people, and the corruption of Christianity, which are now fulfilling in the world; and which, if you will take the trouble to examine them, you will find of such an extraordinary nature, that you will not perhaps hesitate to refer them to God as their author; and if you once become persuaded of the truth of any one miracle, or of the completion of any one prophecy, you will resolve all your difficulties (concerning the manner of God's interposition, in the moral government of our species, and the nature of the doctrines contained in revelation) into your own inability fully to comprehend the whole scheme of divine providence.

WE are told, however, that the strangeness of the narration, and the difficulty of the doctrines contained in the New Testament, are not the only circumstances which induce you to reject it ; you have discovered, you think, so many contradictions, in the accounts which the Evangelists have given of the life of Christ, that you are compelled to consider the whole as an ill-digested and improbable story. You would not reason thus upon any other occasion ; you would not reject as fabulous the accounts given by Livy and Polybius of Hannibal and the Carthaginians, though you should discover a difference betwixt them in several points of little importance. You cannot compare the history of the same events as delivered by any two historians, but you will meet with many circumstances ; which, though mentioned by one, are either wholly omitted or differently related by the other ; and this observation is peculiarly applicable to biographical writings : But no one ever thought of disbelieving the leading circumstances of the lives of Vitellius or Vespasian, because Tacitus and Suetonius did not in every thing correspond in their accounts of these emperors ;

rors ; and if the memoirs of the life and doctrines of M. de Voltaire himself were, some twenty or thirty years after his death, to be delivered to the world by four of his most intimate acquaintance ; I do not apprehend that we should discredit the whole account of such an extraordinary man, by reason of some slight inconsistencies and contradictions, which the avowed enemies of his name might chance to discover in the several narrations. Though we should grant you, then, that the Evangelists had fallen into some trivial contradictions, in what they have related concerning the life of Christ ; yet you ought not to draw any other inference from our concession, than that they had not plotted together, as cheats would have done, in order to give an unexceptionable consistency to their fraud. We are not, however, disposed to make you any such concession ; we will rather shew you the futility of your general argument, by touching upon a few of the places, which you think are most liable to your censure.

You observe, that neither Luke, nor Mark, nor John, have mentioned the cruelty of Herod in murdering the infants of Bethlehem ;
and

and that no account is to be found of this matter in Josephus, who wrote the life of Herod ; and, therefore, the fact recorded by Matthew is not true.—The concurrent testimony of many independent writers concerning a matter of fact unquestionably adds to its probability ; but if nothing is to be received as true, upon the testimony of a single author, we must give up some of the best writers, and disbelieve some of the most interesting facts of ancient history.

ACCORDING to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there was only an interval of three months, you say, between the baptism and crucifixion of Jesus ; from which time taking away the forty days of the temptation, there will only remain about six weeks for the whole period of his public ministry ; which lasted however, according to St. John, at the least above three years.—Your objection fairly stated stands thus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in writing the history of Jesus Christ, mention the several events of his life, as following one another in continued succession, without taking notice of the times in which they happened ; but is it a just conclusion
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from their silence, to infer that there really were no intervals of time between the transactions which they seem to have connected? Many instances might be produced from the most admired biographers of antiquity, in which events are related, as immediately consequent to each other, which did not happen but at very distant periods: We have an obvious example of this manner of writing in St. Matthew; who connects the preaching of John the Baptist with the return of Joseph from Egypt, though we are certain, that the latter event preceded the former by a great many years.

JOHN has said nothing of the institution of the Lord's supper; the other Evangelists have said nothing of the washing of the disciples' feet:—What then? are you not ashamed to produce these facts, as instances of contradictions? if omissions are contradictions, look into the history of the age of Louis the fourteenth, or into the general history of M. de Voltaire, and you will meet with a great abundance of contradictions.

JOHN, in mentioning the discourse which Jesus had with his mother and his beloved disciple, at the time of his crucifixion, says,
that

that she, with Mary Magdalene, stood near the cross; Matthew, on the other hand, says, that Mary Magdalene and the other women were there, beholding afar off: This you think a manifest contradiction; and scoffingly enquire, whether the women and the beloved disciple, which were near the cross, could be the same with those who stood far from the cross?—It is difficult not to transgress the bounds of moderation and good manners, in answering such sophistry; what! have you to learn, that though the Evangelists speak of the crucifixion, as of one event, it was not accomplished in one instant, but lasted several hours? And why the women, who were at a distance from the cross, might not, during its continuance, draw near the cross; or from being near the cross, might not move from the cross, is more than you can explain to either us, or yourselves. And we take from you your only refuge, by denying expressly, that the different Evangelists, in their mention of the women, speak of the same point of time.

THE Evangelists, you affirm, are fallen into gross contradictions, in their accounts of

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the appearances, by which Jesus manifested himself to his disciples, after his resurrection from the dead; for Matthew speaks of two, Mark of three, Luke of two, and John of four. That contradictory propositions cannot be true, is readily granted; and if you will produce the place, in which Matthew says, that Jesus Christ appeared twice and *no oftener*, it will be further granted, that he is contradicted by John, in a very material part of his narration; but till you do that, you must excuse me, if I cannot grant that the Evangelists have contradicted each other in this point; for to common understandings it is pretty evident, that if Christ appeared four times, according to John's account, he must have appeared twice, according to that of Matthew and Luke, and thrice, according to that of Mark.

THE different Evangelists are not only accused of contradicting each other, but Luke is said to have contradicted himself; for in his Gospel he tells us, that Jesus ascended into heaven from Bethany; and in the Acts of the Apostles, of which he is the reputed author, he informs us, that he ascended from Mount Olivet.

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—Your objection proceeds either from your ignorance of geography, or your ill-will to Christianity ; and upon either supposition deserves our contempt : Be pleased, however, to remember for the future, that Bethany was not only the name of a town, but of a district of Mount Olivet adjoining to the town.

FROM this specimen of the contradictions, ascribed to the historians of the life of Christ, you may judge for yourselves, what little reason there is to reject Christianity upon their account ; and how sadly you will be imposed upon, (in a matter of more consequence to you than any other) if you take every thing for a contradiction, which the uncandid adversaries of Christianity think proper to call one.

BEFORE I put an end to this address, I cannot help taking notice of an argument, by which some philosophers have of late endeavoured to overturn the whole system of revelation : And it is the more necessary to give an answer to their objection, as it is become a common subject of philosophical conversation, especially amongst those who have visited the continent. The objection tends to invalidate, as is supposed, the

authority of Moses ; by shewing, that the earth is much older, than it can be proved to be from his account of the creation, and the scripture chronology. We contend, that six thousand years have not yet elapsed since the creation ; and these philosophers contend, that they have indubitable proof of the earth's being at the least fourteen thousand years old ; and they complain, that Moses hangs as a dead weight upon them, and blunts all their zeal for enquiry.*

THE Canonico Recupero, who it seems is engaged in writing the history of Mount Etna, has discovered a stratum of lava, which flowed from that mountain, according to his opinion, in the time of the second Punic war, or about two thousand years ago ; this stratum is not yet covered with soil, sufficient for the production of either corn or vines ; it requires then, says the Canon, two thousand years, at least, to convert a stratum of lava into a fertile field. In sinking a pit near *Jaci*, in the neighbourhood of Etna, they have discovered evident marks of seven distinct lavas, one under the other ; the surfaces of which are parallel, and most of them covered

covered with a thick bed of rich earth ; now the eruption which formed the lowest of these lavas (if I may be allowed to reason, says the Canon, from analogy) flowed from the mountain at least fourteen thousand years ago.—It might be briefly answered to this objection, by denying, that there is any thing in the history of Moses repugnant to this opinion concerning the great antiquity of the earth ; for though the rise and progress of arts and sciences, and the small multiplication of the human species, render it almost to a demonstration probable, that man has not existed longer upon the surface of this earth, than according to the Mosaic account ; yet, that the earth itself was then created out of nothing, when man was placed upon it, is not, according to the sentiments of some philosophers, to be proved from the original text of sacred scripture ; we might, I say, reply with these philosophers, to this formidable objection of the Canon, by granting it in its full extent ; we are under no necessity, however, of adopting their opinion, in order to shew the weakness of the Canon's reasoning. For, in the first place, the Canon has not satisfactorily established his main fact, that the lava in question is the identical

tical lava, which Diodorus Siculus mentions to have flowed from Etna, in the second Carthaginian war ; and in the second place, it may be observed, that the time necessary for converting lavas into fertile fields, must be very different, according to the different consistencies of the lavas, and their different situations, with respect to elevation or depression ; to their being exposed to winds, rains, and to other circumstances ; just as the time in which the heaps of iron slag (which resembles lava) are covered with verdure, is different at different furnaces, according to the nature of the slag, and situation of the furnace ; and something of this kind is deducible from the account of the Canon himself ; since the crevices of this famous stratum are really full of rich good soil, and have pretty large trees growing in them.

BUT if all this should be thought not sufficient to remove the objection, I will produce the Canon an analogy in opposition to his analogy, and which is grounded on more certain facts. Etna and Vesuvius resemble each other, in the causes which produce their eruptions, in the nature of their lavas, and in the time necessary to mellow them into soil fit for vegetation ; or if there be any slight difference in this respect, it is probably

bably not greater than what subsists between different lavas of the same mountain. This being admitted, which no philosopher will deny, the Canon's analogy will prove just nothing at all, if we can produce an instance of seven different lavas (with interjacent strata of vegetable earth) which have flowed from Mount Vesuvius; within the space, not of fourteen thousand, but of somewhat less than seventeen hundred years; for then, according to our analogy, a stratum of lava may be covered with vegetable soil in about two hundred and fifty years, instead of requiring two thousand for the purpose. The eruption of Vesuvius, which destroyed Herculaneum and Pompeii, is rendered still more famous by the death of Pliny, recorded by his nephew, in his letter to Tacitus; this event happened in the year 79; it is not yet then quite seventeen hundred years, since Herculaneum was swallowed up: But we are informed by unquestionable authority, that "the matter which covers the ancient town of Herculaneum, is not the produce of one eruption only; for there are evident marks, that the matter of six eruptions has taken its course over that which lies immediately above the town, and was the cause of its destruction.

destruction. These strata are either of lava or burnt matter, *with veins of good soil betwixt them.*” *
 —I will not add another word upon this subject; except that the bishop of the diocese was not much out in his advice to Canonico Recupero—to take care not to make his mountain older than Moses; though it would have been full as well to have shut his mouth with a reason; as to have stopped it with the dread of an ecclesiastical censure.

You perceive, with what ease a little attention will remove a great difficulty; but had we been able to say nothing in explanation of this phænomenon, we should not have acted a very rational part, in making our ignorance the foundation of our infidelity, or suffering a minute philosopher to rob us of our religion.

YOUR objections to revelation may be numerous; you may find fault with the account which Moses has given of the creation, and the fall; you may not be able to get water enough for an universal deluge; nor room enough in the ark of Noah, for all the different kinds of
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* See Sir William Hamilton's Remarks upon the Nature of the Soil of Naples and its Neighbourhood, in the Philos. Trans. Vol. lxi. p. 7.

must think for yourselves ; and you must do both with temper, with candour, and with care. Infidelity is a rank weed ; it is nurtured by our vices, and cannot be plucked up as easily as it may be planted : Your difficulties with respect to revelation, may have first arisen, from your own reflexion on the religious indifference of those, whom from your earliest infancy you have been accustomed to revere, and imitate ; domestic irreligion may have made you willing hearers of libertine conversation ; and the uniform prejudices of the world may have finished the business, at a very early age ; and left you to wander through life, without a principle to direct your conduct, and to die without hope. We are far from wishing you to trust the word of the Clergy for the truth of your religion ; we beg of you to examine it to the bottom, to try it, to prove it, and not to hold it fast unless you find it good. Till you are disposed to undertake this task, it becomes you to consider with great seriousness and attention, whether it can be for your interest to esteem a few witty sarcasms, or metaphysical subtleties, or ignorant misrepresentations, or unwarranted assertions, as unanswerable arguments against revelation ;

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lation ; and a very flight reflexion will convince you, that it will certainly be for your reputation, to employ the flippancy of your rhetoric, and the poignancy of your ridicule, upon any subject, rather than upon the subject of Religion.

I TAKE my leave with recommending to your notice, the advice which Mr. Locke gave to a young man, who was desirous of becoming acquainted with the doctrines of the Christian religion. “ Study the holy scripture, especially the New Testament : Therein are contained the words of eternal life. It has God for its author ; Salvation for its end ; and Truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”*

I am, &c.

* Locke's Posth. Works.



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